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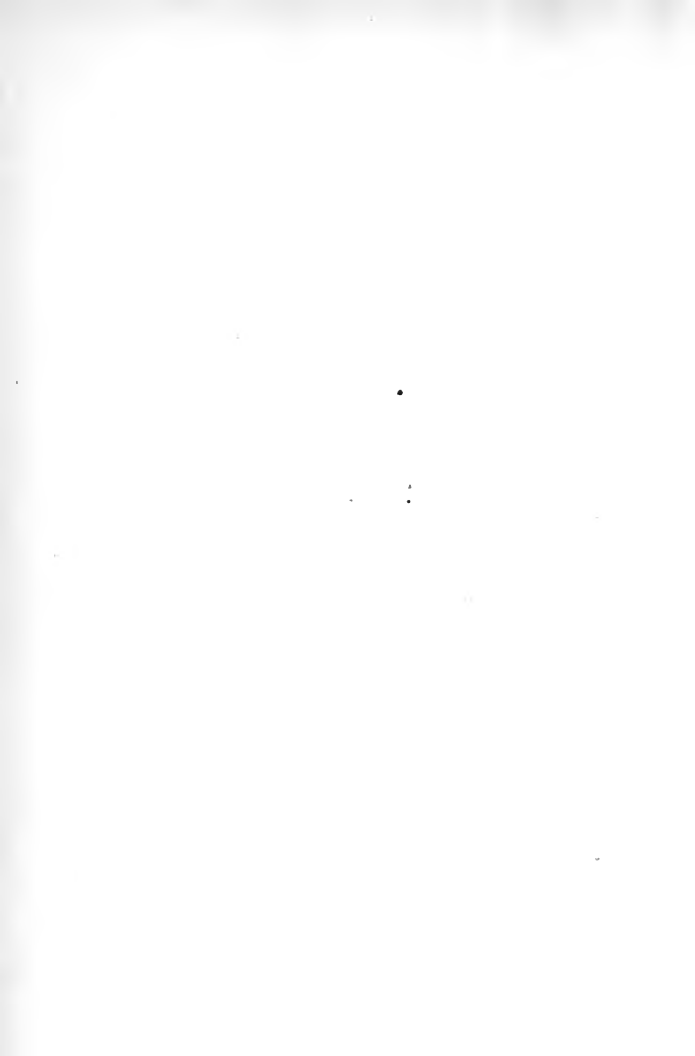


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THE BOY HIKERS HOMeward BOUND CHELSEA CURTIS FRASER



Fraser
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THE NEXT MOMENT HE FOUND HIS ARMS BOUND TO THE FLOOR
WITH GRIPPING IRON-LIKE FINGERS.—PAGE 21.

THE BOY HIKERS HOMEWARD BOUND

BY
CHELSEA CURTIS FRASER

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY HIKERS"

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
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PUBLISHERS

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FOREWORD

There is a party of schoolboys who are learning the joys of the hike down dusty roads, across grassy fields, and through shadowy woods.

In the preceding volume, "The Boy Hikers," was told their experiences in walking across the State of New Jersey to New York City. The present book concerns itself with what happened them in the big metropolis and on their trip back home. Again they have stirring adventures.

They are learning to love the warm sunshine that ripens the waving grain and tans their white skins; the pure air that imparts its richness to the landscape and fills their growing lungs with a wonderful exhilaration; the fascinating music of the winds that strum the strings of bramble and thicket, glen, byway and timbered aisle; the plaintive calls of the birds, the animals, the waters, the storms; the magic touch of divers wild creations; the sight of strange, curious, noble formations.

All of these things are they learning to love through the hike. And because they see in them the hand of the One who has wrought them, and placed them, and because He has chosen to

Jan. 19/20
of 20th, 44th and 66th

FOREWORD

create and place them in these wondrously fair places of this their own native land, they are learning to love and revere their God and their America. And because they so love them both, they desire as much to serve them both.

So this is the spirit that grows out of the homely hike—the hike down dusty roads, across grassy fields, and through shadowy woods.

C. C. F.

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BOY HIKERS HOMEWARD BOUND

CHAPTER I

ON THE ROOF

"WHAT did I tell you, fellers! Ain't it *some* sight?"

The steel-gray eyes of the speaker twinkled as he put the question to the eight sturdy, sun-tanned youths who stood near him. Of them all, he was the older, but still lithe and boyish of form. At his side dangled an empty sleeve.

At his interrogation expressive gasps of wonder and astonishment went the rounds of his companions, who were gathered upon the roof of the Berkshire Hotel, in the big city of New York, this first morning following their arrival after a long and adventurous tramp across the State of New Jersey.

"You certainly didn't over-praise it," declared Jack Westwood, squaring his broad shoulders about and gazing admiringly in another direction. "One-Wing, to chaps like most of us,

brought up back in the interior of the United States, where a five-story building looks like a mountain, this almost unending array of real skyscrapers is enough to take away the breath!"

"We're not so low ourselves as we might be," remarked a very fat youth, gingerly leaning his ample proportions out over the coping of the seven-story hotel for a better look down into the street levels below. "Even from here, my merry children, it makes your head swim to look down."

"Be careful there, Little Elephant, or you may lean out too far and suddenly go traveling," cautioned Clare Wallace, the serious one.

"Well, if I do I'll be fairly well equipped for a trip," squealed Grease Schottenberger, still gazing downward quite blissfully.

"How's that, Elephant?" queried Clare.

"I'll have my trunk with me!"

"Oho! One on you, Clare!" laughed Joe Laporte, his dark face showing unwonted pleasure, for he was often himself the victim of Grease's keen quips.

At this point another of the little group—a roguish-looking lad named Ears Stoddard—reached forth and, suddenly catching Grease by the hips, gave the fat boy a slight jolt.

The effect on the leaning fellow was immediate and greatly amusing to his comrades. He

let a yell out of himself that startled two sleepy nighthawks in a niche of the wall nearby into the wildest kind of flight. The yell died into a sputtering gurgle, and Grease, kicking out like an enraged mule, shoved himself back from the coping so quickly that everybody laughed uproariously.

"What—what—did you do that for—you—you—" demanded the fat boy of Ears. His heart must have been jumping a mile a minute. He choked upon his words.

"Thought you said you were well-equipped for the journey, Grease," grinned Ears.

"Um-m," said Grease, beginning to regain his habitual good-nature, as a feeble smile spread over his own liberal features. "Well, please remember, all of you, that being prepared for a thing and really desiring to indulge in the thing are often distinct conditions!"

The Boy Hikers now turned again to view the physical aspects of America's greatest and busiest city. Talk was forgotten. In the inspiring panorama stretched out before, beside, behind and below them, the mind had too much to occupy itself with to give further attention to verbal expression. All each lad there wished to do, for a few minutes, at least, was just to look, look, look.

From their elevation everything not actually

attached to their own building, no matter how close, seemed to have a strange, weird effect of distance. It appeared that they were not actually a part of anything which lay about them, but rather isolated, favored beholders.

Just across the street—so close that Jack, with his unerring aim, could have thrown a ball into almost any one of its opposite windows—was a huge, thirty-two-storied mercantile institution. Even as they looked the sashes of other windows, higher up and lower down, were being raised by attendants within, preparatory to a warm mid-summer day. From the roof, far up, a new American flag flapped in the light morning breeze.

In fact, turn which way they would, the beloved colors of their country could be seen floating from the top of practically every structure, grand or humble, within their wide range of vision. It was a vast sea of beautiful red and white bars and azure-backed snowy stars. What a galaxy of color—and of inspiration! How a fellow's heart did swell at the splendid sight!

Vibrating at their very arms was the tall staff of the hotel, with its own fluttering addition of patriotic flavor to the scene.

A little farther down the street, rising triumphantly still higher than the building the boys faced, was the gigantic skeleton of what

would some day in the near future boast of its greater architectural supremacy. In this vast open structure of steel rods and girders, stone and concrete pillars, several rough elevators penetrated to the topmost reaches, and powerful little donkey-engines on the ground below were whirring up loads of building materials, amid a perfect Bedlam of cable screechings and tooting of signal whistles.

On the very upper works of the big skeleton another engine operated a great derrick. Suspended from the heavy chains of this, a long steel girder was being slowly swung to position over the heads of pedestrians far beneath. A steel-worker, looking at that distance no larger than a doll, was perched coolly upon the beam, as it went, directing by waving hand its proper placement to the watchful engineer above. In other places blue-clad men bestrode lodged girders like boys playing horse, and amid a deafening clatter of pneumatic hammers, headed over the red-hot rivets that were to make the joints strong.

When the boys tired of looking at nearby objects they let their gaze wander afar. Their knowledge of geography told them that straight ahead to the eastward must flow the sluggish waters of the East River, with its extensive system of piers and docks, great warehouses and ship-

ping, and its famous Brooklyn Suspension Bridge from which Steve Brodie, daring boot-black, had made his successful plunge years before. But, even though One-Wing, who had visited New York before, told them that this waterway was less than a mile off, all they could see of it was the upper works of the bridge on account of intervening buildings.

However, behind them, in the opposite direction, lanes of lower edifices permitted vistas of water and maritime rigging, which One-Wing said belonged to the historical Hudson. As they looked, they almost fancied they could see Henry Hudson himself coming up this noble stream with his little party of explorers, or Robert Fulton making the first successful attempt at steamboat navigation.

Farther away, to the south, all could plainly make out expanses of New York Bay, its waters reflecting the sunlight in a myriad of diamond-like sparklings. Here and there upon its bosom were indistinct shapes of floating craft which, at that considerable distance, might have been anything from a tug to a battleship.

Turning now, the boys discovered the tops of two towering buildings they had not seen before. These, One-Wing declared, were the Woolworth and Metropolitan buildings, comparatively new business structures. They rose,

sheer and commanding, many feet above their surrounding contemporary kind, wonderful examples of American engineering skill.

"The Woolworth's the highest," remarked the former tramp, "but not much. They say it's something like sixty stories. If we had a spy-glass we might try to count 'em."

"I'd want an adding-machine along with the spy-glass," observed Jack Westwood, at which there was a laugh.

Here and there, like oases in a desert, little patches of refreshing greenery were visible. These, the boys rightly guessed, were the city's prideful parks—real oases, indeed, in the heat of summer for the tired and parched populace who lived and worked away from growing things. As a matter of fact, less than a hundred rods at their left they could look down upon the cool canopy of leaves shading the nearest of these rest-spots—Washington Square,—and in the interstices catch glimpses of grass, and benches upon which lounged weary forms even at this early hour of the day.

Now their attention was called up Broadway by the inspiring martial strains of a band. Crowding closer to the edge of the roof, the lads felt their hearts and pulses quicken, as they saw the cause of the music and heard faint cheers.

Platoon after platoon of American soldiers,

guns aslant shoulder, were coming. Traffic officers ahead were busy clearing the way. Already the walks directly below were beginning to congest with humanity.

Presently the soldiers came abreast of the hotel. As they went by, the band playing "Over There," and Old Glory waving at their head, those upon the roof could not refrain from impulsively throwing up their caps and cheering lustily—so wildly and concertedly that more than one of the marching Yanks felt impelled to throw his eyes upward for just a brief moment.

Something told the Hikers that these splendid-looking fellows, so firm and perfect of step, so determined of countenance, were not on parade. And as the last platoon went by, and the broad lines of flickering brown up ahead turned off toward the great transport piers, the little group high up on the Broadway hotel knew for a certainty what it all meant—another American contingent off for service across the big waters, a service that meant much to the cause of world freedom and suffering France and Belgium.

As the last marcher swung out of sight, One-Wing, who had been standing tense, with the fingers of his only hand clenched painfully into the palm, exclaimed fretfully:

"Oh, kids, if I could only go with 'em! Ain't it jest about the bummiest thing imag'nable to

love yer country, to see a sight like that, an' have a thing like *this!*" He flopped his empty sleeve disgustedly and forlornly.

"It must be sort of tough," grumbled Ears Stoddard, "but just think of *me!* I've got *two* good arms, to match the pair of any beastly Hun. Yet, just because I was born a few years too late, they say, "Stay at home and grow some more, sonny!" "

"We're all in that boat except One-Wing," squealed Grease Schottenberger, wiping his broad forehead. "But there are other ways to help out in this war, you know, fellows. Take a squint at all these flags around us! Aren't they inspiring? Well, we can fight under stationary ones just as well as moving ones!"

A few minutes later all went down into the hotel.

CHAPTER II

AT THE AQUARIUM

WITH only two weeks to spend in the city, and with scores of interesting places to visit which they wanted to be sure and see within that time, it may be understood that the boys were not long in the hotel before emerging upon the sidewalk in front of its wide doors.

They had doffed their khaki hiking costume for the lighter and dressier summer wear of the street, which they had shipped ahead, along with their baseball equipment, in two capacious trunks. Most of them wore white outing shoes, linen trousers and golf caps. All were coatless, as the day promised to be warm. They surely looked very natty and cool in their soft sport shirts with half-sleeves. Grease, the fat boy, was the only one with a straw hat. This head-gear was a stiff sailor of unusually broad brim, and since Grease was wont to give it liberal use as a fan the reader may figure out why he chose this particular type of hat to the limp kind of his companions'.

For a moment they paused on the street to determine their next line of action. A glance at the hotel clock on the way out had shown them that it was yet comparatively early in the morning. Practically the whole day lay before them for seeing things at closer range than possible from their recent position on the roof.

"Let's go to Central Park, fellows," proposed Tiny MacHugh, hands on lanky hips and arms akimbo.

"Too dangerous, son," replied Clare Wallace, seriously and paternally, looking up into the big fellow's rugged face. "You forget that there are trees there. The lower branches would be sure to scratch your dear little head. Now let me propose a *good* place to go—New York's famous Public Library."

There was a universal groan at this suggestion.

"We might have known it," said Ben Stoddard sadly. "It's a shame we're not in Washington, D. C., so Clare could propose going to the Smithsonian Institute—"

"Or in Boston, so he might spend a week or two in the College of the Science of Reformed Lunatics," added Ears, Ben's brother. "After all, I say the Brooklyn Bridge is the only place—"

"To avoid," squealed Grease. "Ears, just be-

cause you got a model-builder from Santa Claus last Christmas, please, please don't think we're all batty about bridges, and derricks, and too-too cars, and so-on! Why don't you cultivate your nature a little? You should know the joy and satisfaction to the intellect of visiting, for instance a—a big cheese factory."

Everybody roared. As the merriment subsided, One-Wing spoke up for the first time. "There seems to be too many tastes in this crowd, kids. Now, how many here would be interested in seein' the finest collection o' fish in this part o' the world?"

"Dead or alive?" propounded Jack Westwood.

"Very much alive an' kickin'—I mean swimmin'," was the response. "Down at the foot of Broadway, in Battery Park, is the celebrated New York Aquarium. Admission is free, an' it ain't more'n a mile-an'-a-half walk. I've been in there afore, an' it certainly is well worth seein'. How about it?"

Nearly all of the boys had read or heard about this well-known aquarium, and eagerly accepted the one-armed young man's proposal.

They decided to walk rather than board a car, since, as Jack said, in this way they could take in the sights along the way more at leisure and much more completely.

So they wended their way slowly down lower Broadway. They noticed that many passing motor trucks were driven by women in overalls, and noted that women seemed also to be operating upon the surface cars as conductors. In fact, as they continued, everywhere they looked they saw evidences of this kind showing how willingly and efficiently the womanhood of America was responding to her crying need of workers to take the places left vacant by the young men who had gone across the big waters to battle the Hun.

In the fields along the dusty roads, during their trip to the city, the boys had likewise seen girls taking the place of their drafted brothers—in some instances even gray-haired widowed mothers—wielding pitchfork and hoe, and guiding horse-drawn cultivator and motor-propelled tractor, that the valiant fighters abroad and their supporters at home might be fed.

Truly these were sights to inspire deep thought in any boy, as they did in the Boy Hikers, and make them proud of America's womankind, and zealous to do their own share in this great work at home. Indeed, as they walked along and saw more and more evidence of young women uncomplainingly toiling over tasks of the big city which were plainly too burdensome for some of them to carry, a flush

began to mount to the temples of more than one of them, and before they had gone far it was agreed that at least a part of their proposed two-weeks' rest and sight-seeing would be put in doing something themselves toward the furtherance of a successful war.

They passed the huge twin buildings of the Court-House and City Hall, and a few squares farther on came to the big gray-stone central Post-Office. Here they went in long enough to ask for their mail, and to send cards to the loved ones at home. Some of the party had quite extensive mailing lists; for most of their friends, as well as relatives, had asked to be remembered on the hike at every opportunity with souvenir cards. Grease declared, upon coming out of the building, that at the first chance he was going to get a rubber-stamp made, with some such text as this: "Just arrived. Feeling fine. Enjoying the trip immensely. Herman." "It'll save me getting writer's-cramp," he explained.

A little farther on the boys went by St. Paul's Cathedral, and some squares lower down, the well-known Trinity Church. Here was an intersecting thoroughfare which One-Wing pointed out as Wall Street. His comrades instantly recognized the name as that connected with New York's most famous speculative mart, the home of the Stock Exchange, the scene of

almost daily wild bickerings in the course of which money-mad men were made rich and poor in a minute; where the hard savings of years took wings in an instant, making one lucky man excruciatingly happy, the unlucky man miserably disheartened.

Within a very short time the boys had reached the head of Manhattan Island, and turned into the grounds of Battery Park, which fronts the juncture of the East and Hudson Rivers.

Before them stood the world's largest aquarium. It was a peculiar-looking building, they thought. It was very low, massive withal, squatty; and its smooth walls, with loophole-like windows, and round wings and terraced balconies, to say nothing of its octagonal cupola, gave it a decided military aspect. They discovered later, in fact, that it had been originally a fortification of Colonial days, which, with some modifications, had been converted into its present use.

At that early hour few visitors were present. This undoubtedly was a fortunate thing for the Boy Hikers, inasmuch as they soon ran onto an attendant who obligingly offered to show them around.

This man explained that the building was far too small to accommodate the exhibit of specimens of rare fishes and other forms of aquatic

life that the Zoölogical Society would like to put in, and that for this reason it had for some years been taxed to its capacity, which was one hundred tanks. Yet, he said, to their unbounded surprise, in these hundred tanks there were close to six thousand specimens of all kinds! This included three thousand one hundred eighty-six fishes, representing one hundred forty different species. Besides there were ninety-five aquatic reptiles of twenty-three species; one hundred sixty-six amphibians, of fourteen species; two specimens of aquatic mammals, and over two thousand invertebrates of twenty-one species.

So far as they could see at first, these creatures were all kept in two galleries of glass-fronted tanks, with the sunlight illuminating them from above, although the larger specimens, like the porpoises, sea-lions, drumfish, groupers, alligators and tortoises, were in large open pools on the ground floor.

But when the visitor goes "behind the scenes," as the boys were permitted to do subsequently, he finds that there is much more to the maintaining of such an aquarium than he ever could have imagined. Their guide explained that in order to properly supply both the fresh-water and salt-water specimens with their natural element, two systems of piping were installed by means of which big reservoirs on the upper

floors were kept constantly filled with the right kind of water.

"May I ask where this water comes from?" asked Jack, as they stopped before one of the tanks, decoratively covered with plants.

"From the Bay right nearby, of course, ninny," put in Joe Laporte at once.

Their guide looked at Joe rather witheringly. Somehow the French boy seemed always to have a way of making people dislike him. "You're wrong, young man," said the man. "The Bay water is too much polluted for these fishes. They would soon die in it. Captive fishes are more sensitive to foul water than free fishes. Our salt water is brought in by a tug which pumps it aboard away outside of the Ambrose Channel. When the tug comes in she re-pumps the water up here into our salt-water reservoir. Then the water runs through the filters, which cleanses it. Our fresh water comes through pipes direct from the city water-works. You might not think it, now, but it is quite a task to keep these two kinds of water at just the proper temperature all the time for the various fishes, but we do it. For instance, in summer we have to use a cooling-plant in order to lower the natural temperature, so that such fishes as the salmon, trout and whitefish, which are natives of cold water averaging fifty-four

degrees, won't perish. Just the opposite, in the winter we have to warm the water for them, as well as for all others. On the other hand, the tropical fishes must have a much higher temperature than their northern brothers."

"What do you feed them?" asked Ears.

"Depends on the kind of fish we're feeding, lad, but I might cover it by saying that we use chiefly meat, fish and clams—sliced, chopped or minced, as may be necessary to suit the kind and size of the specimens. Liver and clams are mostly used for the smaller varieties. At the rear, below, we have what we call the 'kitchen.' Here, the 'chef' prepares the food for his big family, and, believe me, it's worse than looking after the guests of a big hotel! He has just as many kinds of appetites to suit, has to humor sick as well as the hungry, and all the time he must 'Hooverize' by not preparing too much, otherwise the tanks will become foul and fatal from uneaten food. The fishes are fed three times a week—Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays,—about sundown."

The boys found many other interesting things about the Aquarium before they quitted it, among these the fish hatcheries, where trout, salmon, perch, whitefish and smelt were developed from eggs and young fry donated by the United States Bureau of Fisheries.

As it was near the noon hour, they decided to take a car back to the hotel for lunch at once. They were just getting on this when a descending passenger caught the eye of One-Wing. As this man, a rather rough-looking fellow, but well-dressed, disappeared in the crowds on the walk, One-Wing rubbed his eyes disbelievingly, and then gave vent to a short laugh.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack, as they took seats in the car.

"Guess I had a nightmare," chuckled One-Wing. "Thought I just saw Red, one o' the tramps that stole me when I was a kid. But I sure was dreamin'. This feller had on good duds, an' I never seen Red in anything but rags."

CHAPTER III

JUST MONKEYSHINES

"PERHAPS the man was this Red," said Jack, as the car bowled them up Broadway. "Prosperity might have smiled upon him since you saw him last."

"It's possible," admitted One-Wing. "It must be fully ten years ago that I got away from him an' Limpy Mike, his pal, an' a lot kin happen in that time. But if I live to be a thousand years old I can't ferget Red's little greenish-lookin' eyes an' heavy yeller-white eyebrows, an' the reddish scar jest to the right of his square, bristly chin. The chap I jest saw was shaved clean, but I'll swear he was Red in every other way—if I wasn't dreamin'."

"Did he see you?"

"Didn't seem to do so partic'larly."

"Do you think Red would recognize you now?"

"It's hard sayin', but I doubt it, Jack. The last time he saw me I wasn't much more'n half-grown, an' sence that I've lost my arm too. You'll admit I must 'a' changed considerable."

"That's so. Well I imagine you're satisfied to grow out of his memory, aren't you?"

"I'm tickled to death. Red an' Limpy Mike were a worthless pair o' scalawags, especially Red."

"Why was he called 'Red'? Red hair?"

"Nary a spear o' red hair in Red's bull-dog head! It was his face, that give him the name, I've heard Limpy Mike say. His face was as red as—as—a rooster's comb, almost."

Shortly after this the Boy Hikers reached Third Street, and went into the hotel where they were stopping. Their toilets were soon made, following which they took seats at a couple of unoccupied tables in the dining-room.

While waiting for the first course to be served, Ears picked up a copy of the *Herald* and glanced over it. At a request of his companions he read aloud bits relating to the latest war news. One item particularly occasioned comment. This was prominently displayed on the first page of the paper, and read thus:

ARE HUN FIRE-BUGS CAUSING THESE FIRES?

More Barns Reported to Have Gone Up in Flames, Under
Suspicious Circumstances, in Various Parts
of the Country.

THIS STATE REPORTS NEW CONFLAGRATIONS

The latest reports bring news of three additional barn fires in New York State, in counties widely scattered, mak-

ing eight conflagrations within the past ten days. Two of the barns mentioned were burned to the ground, with much stored grain and hay, a total loss; the other was saved by farmers.

In view of the fact that similar fires have occurred in various States, all recently, and in each case the buildings have been those recently stored with valuable crops, and no satisfactory cause of ignition determined, it begins to look very strongly as if they might be the result of an organized band of pro-German fire-bugs whose members are widely separated over the rural fields of our fair land and availing themselves of this despicable means of aiding their Hun brothers in Germany and Austria.

This, if true, is a new and all-powerful element of peril to our country that must be stopped in some way at the earliest moment. Every farmer must not only use the utmost care to prevent accidental fires upon his property, but he should also keep a sharp eye out for suspicious persons.

"Hum-m!" said Tiny. "These suspicions of the press look pretty well grounded to me. We fellows know, from past experience, that what the 'American' Hun won't think of, or dare, to help his 'dear old Faderlandt', isn't in the Book of Thinks."

"Just like the ornery devils to do a thing like this!" growled One-Wing. "To escape the tyranny of their own country they come over here, n' then, after we've given 'em a chance to live like somebody, an' they've laid up all kinds of money and property through it, they turn around an' stab us in the back when we have a scrap with their former oppressors."

"It looks to me more like a newspaper scare-head than anything else," remarked Joe La-porte. "The papers make a lot out of nothing nowadays in order to increase sales. We didn't run against any fires on our way here across New Jersey, did we?"

"What if we didn't?" exploded Ben. "Is that any sign, Joe? These fellows wouldn't be setting barns afire along every country road in the land. They'd get nabbed in no time."

"I think Ben's right," put in Jack. "If these Germans are organized to burn barns, they're likely to scatter their jobs as much as possible. Then, too, they will be more likely to do more of this dirty work a few weeks later, when the grain is harvested. The majority of the farmers have standing wheat yet."

By this time their lunch was brought in, and all dropped the discussion for a task much more to their immediate satisfaction.

After the meal it was decided to spend the afternoon in a boat trip to Coney Isle, the big amusement park near the western end of Long Island, of which few American boys have not heard or read.

So, after a short rest in the lobby of the hotel for about an hour, they set out, under directions from the clerk, to find the pier from which the ferry to Coney Isle left. They discovered that

their directions brought them again to Battery Park, where after a short wait, they boarded the staunch little boat they sought.

The afternoon was bright and clear, and the sun hot. But a cool, refreshing breeze struck the decks from seaward and made the trip down the greenish-blue waters of the Upper Bay a very pleasant one to our friends. They passed quite close to the great bronze Statue of Liberty, on Bedloe's Island, which had been the first familiar landmark of New York they had seen the evening before when they came out upon the Jersey City pier, after their long hike across New Jersey, and all now availed themselves of the opportunity for a closer study of the colossal elevation.

Governor's Island was also passed. Then they had a splendid view of the rolling green fields of Long Island, on their left, with a big encampment of soldiers awaiting overseas transportation. At least a half-dozen military aeroplanes hovered up in the heavens, like so many huge birds, above this cantonment. Over on the left were the equally fertile fields of Staten Island, interrupted here and there with the roofs of buildings where some small town nestled.

They were soon passing through the more confined waters of The Narrows. A fellow-

passenger showed them Gravesend Bay, and farther ahead pointed out the long promontory on which Coney Isle itself was situated, in the Lower Bay.

Presently the boat was warped in to the pier of their destination, and the boys proceeded to enjoy the numerous amusement features that lay all about them.

Coney Isle might be termed the "Modern Monkeyshine," for while one may find much that is soberly interesting and soberly instructive, the real office that most of its multitude of features provides is that of making one laugh at himself and others. Here every afternoon and evening of the hot summer months, hundreds and hundreds of tired city workers gladly give up a small portion of their wage to make monkeys of themselves and to watch others do likewise. The oldest and most sedate, while they are at Coney Isle at least, become as hilarious and as anticful as the youngest—not always from selection, but because (as our party soon discovered) they simply cannot help themselves!

Entering the first building they came to, which was quite warm, they stopped to look around.

"Scissors!" puffed Grease, reaching for a handkerchief to mop his perspiring brow, "It's hot enough in here to roast a clay pigeon! Wonder they wouldn't provide a little breeze for a fellow—"

Just then the fat boy got his wish. He had stepped around an innocent-looking mound of flowering plants in the center of the apartment, and from the mouth of a mammoth pneumatic tube concealed within the vegetation he received a gust of wind that all but bowed in his sturdy legs and tore his shirt off his back! As for his treasured broad-brimmed straw hat, it was sent sailing wildly through the air, struck the floor, and went rolling to the farthest corner of the apartment.

His comrades avoided a similar fate by the narrowest of margins, stepping back out of the zone of wind just in time. They laughed heartily, as poor Grease went scrambling madly after his escaped headgear, and others in the room who had witnessed the episode, joined in.

Grease, as was his custom, took his discomfiture good-naturedly, and a little later, when Clare was precipitated into a large sunken bowl, with sides as smooth as glass, he had his chance to laugh. They had a lot of fun before Clare was able to extricate himself, which was finally accomplished by the stiffest kind of spiral sprinting, after many ignominious tumbles to the bottom again.

In still another building the fun continued. Here they saw people passing up an open stairway, sitting down at its top in an inviting-look-

ing low chair, then suddenly sinking out of sight. Shrieks of wildest alarm were intermixed with guffaws of hearty amusement from the invisible regions just beyond.

One-Wing looked at his companions, then upward, and grinned. Every one nodded his willingness to investigate, and they went up the steps in a procession. They now noticed that as fast as the chair carried its occupant out of sight it re-appeared for another charge without him.

The one-armed young man was the first to seat himself. His weight immediately released a spring, apparently, for the next moment he had vanished, with an excited gurgle. One by one the boys followed.

Like One-Wing, they found themselves nicely deposited into an unseen chute that was as slippery as slippery could be, and gasping for breath between their laughing shouts, they went feet first, on their backs, down the winding course. At intervals was a bump which would render their voices into the most comical change of note. Then, with a terrific *swish* around a long turn, they were suddenly precipitated onto a gigantic whirling disk. This, too, was very slippery, with not a solitary projection to grasp.

On its shining surface all of the boys, except Grease, were sliding and bumping into one an-

other, a heterogenous mass of flying legs and arms, trying hard not to be flung into the gutter at the edge of the great wheel. Around the low railing that enclosed the device, many people who had been victims themselves, laughed and exclaimed at the antics of the fresh comers.

I have said that Grease had not yet put in an appearance. Presently he came shooting down the incline, more of a human ball than anything else. In fact one frightened woman onlooker took him for a clothes basket, Ears afterward stoutly averred.

Be that as it may, the fat boy soon made his presence felt, as well as seen. Four of his comrades were trying to hold a most precarious position upon the disk by clinging desperately in a bunch to one another, when all at once the catapulted huge form of the last of their number hit them squarely, and they were scattered to the four quarters of the wheel like ninepins, rolling off into the gutter.

As for Grease he kept rolling and sliding hither and thither, seemingly trying to dig off all the finish of the whirling disk with his clutching fingernails. In the course of this he somehow managed to dexterously bunt into his four remaining chums and send them sprawling into the gutter with the others. But presently he, the victor, was also sent to the region of the

vanquished by a collision with the feet of a big darkey who had been the next to follow down the chute.

There were many other amusing stunts that the boys went through that afternoon which I will not attempt to describe. It is enough to say that when they finally took the boat for the city they had put in a most enjoyable time and one not soon to be forgotten.

CHAPTER IV

PLOTTERS AT WORK

ON the eighth floor of a big office building, at Broadway and Fulton Streets, New York City, are many well-furnished business apartments occupied by men in various lines of professional endeavor among which the law, brokerage, real estate and insurance activities predominate.

Among these offices there was, at the time of our story, one about half-way down a broad corridor which bore, upon its frosted glass door panel, the number "817." Just below there followed these lines:

WILLIAM SPIESS
FIRE INSURANCE AND
REAL ESTATE

The outer room was large, and equipped with all the adjuncts of the modern office of its kind. There were several visitors' chairs of expensive design and elaborately upholstered; two oak desks of the sanitary type, one evidently the proprietor's, and the other a clerk's; a mounted

adding-machine, a safe, and a tall filing cabinet in one corner. On the walls hung several large calendars and a number of framed pictures, most of the latter being views of buildings, as behooved a business of this nature.

At the right of the room was a door communicating with another apartment, evidently the proprietor's personal sanctum, as the door was marked "Private." This was a smaller room than the other. At one side, near a window looking down upon Fulton Street, stood a roll-top desk, a small safe, and a revolving chair. Nearby were other chairs, a table; and in a corner, a leather-covered lounge. These walls likewise held pictures of various buildings, but in addition there was in one place a large map of the city hanging from a rod.

To judge from a Red Cross pledge card, and several small American flags prominently displayed over the desks in both apartments, the owner was fully as patriotic as most of his business associates in the big building.

In fact, Mr. William Spiess was considered to be exceptionally willing to assist in alleviating the war-time needs of the country. In every instance he had been a quick and liberal giver to the various patriotic funds, and no solicitor was ever known to leave his office without great admiration for him. If any one recalled that

this gentleman had been in America a matter of something less than ten years, and came from Germany, the enemy country, he failed to connect the thought with distrust, for it was known that the pleasant-spoken, affable occupant of Room No. 817 had taken out his citizenship papers several years before the outbreak of the war, and was very outspoken in his displeasure at the stand taken by his autocratic mother country.

To add to his prestige, he had made himself popular socially—a thing not hard to do in that big city where young men of brilliant personality are accepted for what they appear to be more than for what investigation might disclose them to be. So William Spiess, not much over thirty, tall, slender and good-looking, with a Berlin University education, and speaking perfect English, soon installed himself in the confidence of his social and business associates.

How much he deserved this trust, how much he meant by his affability, tirades at the doings of Germany, and his contributions to the war fund campaigns of America, the reader will soon be able to judge.

With this little introduction, we find Spiess himself coming up in one of the elevators of the building in which his office is located.

It was about eight-thirty of the morning the

Boy Hikers visited the Aquarium. In his hand, the dapper insurance man carried a copy of the morning paper which he had purchased from a boy upon the street below, according to his daily custom. He was known as an avidious reader of the press, especially of war news, and seldom failed to secure both the morning and evening editions of his favorite sheet.

He unlocked the door of No. 817, glanced sharply about the room, and passed into the smaller apartment, where, as in the other place, he made a searching survey of the effects. However, here he did something that he did not seem to feel it necessary to do in the larger room: he stooped before the small safe and pulled tentatively at the handle of the combination, as if he thought it might have been tampered with during his absence.

Satisfied that the safe was all right, the lines of anxiety about the corners of his little mustached lip changed themselves into greater relaxation, as he muttered to himself the German equivalent of: "The papers are all right, as usual. I suppose I am foolish to be so uneasy, as no one suspects, but a man can never tell when he's safe in a game like this. He must take nothing for granted."

So saying, he hung up his hat and coat, and re-entering the larger room, lounged into a chair

before his desk and delved into the realms of his newspaper. Most of the news from the French frontier that morning told of the successes of the Entente Allies. One might naturally have expected such items to be highly gratifying to the reader in the chair, considering his public avowals and deeds. But, on the contrary, the expression upon his mealy, fair-skinned face was one of plain dissatisfaction.

A few minutes of nine there was a light step at the hall door, and the next moment a neatly attired young lady entered.

This was the insurance man's stenographer and book-keeper. His sour features immediately assumed a pleasant expression. He said "Good-morning" with his usual cheeriness, asked kindly after a slight headache about which she had complained the day before, and then remarked, as she took up her task over a ledger: "More good news from our boys in France, Miss Hudson."

"I am glad to hear that, Mr. Spiess," was the answer, as she looked up with glowing eyes. "You know I have a brother over there fighting with Pershing's forces."

"Yes, I know," he said. Under his breath he muttered: "Confound the cuss; I hope he never returns, nor any of the rest of his mates!" But he went on, aloud, with continued hypocritical

smiles and apparent enthusiasm: "This paper states that the Americans, in raids just made along their sector, have taken a number of German prisoners and secured much valuable military information. That is great news. I hope they keep it up."

"I hope so too, sir. You are so loyal for a German-born gentleman! It is a wonder to me sometimes that you have not enlisted in the officers' branch of the United States army."

"I may do so eventually, Miss Hudson. Just now I feel that I can be of greater service to this great and glorious country right here in New York. By-the-way, I shall go to my private apartment now to finish my reading. When the mail comes, bring it in."

"Yes, sir."

Seating himself upon the couch in the other room, Spiess prepared to resume his reading where his expression of countenance would not be a target to chance observation.

It was lucky that he had had this amount of forethought, for he had been occupied with the paper a comparatively short time when his gaze fell upon an item the perusal of which seemed to cause him unusual interest, and to call forth scowls and under-breath vindictive ejaculations, in decided ill-keeping with his demeanor when in the presence of his stenographer.

The article which apparently disturbed Mr. William Spiess to such an extent dealt with the arrival of the Boy Hikers in the city the evening before. It gave quite a full account of their doings in the trip across New Jersey, giving them credit for the arrest of the German wireless agents, and highly commending their scheme of aiding farmers and helping swell the Red Cross fund.

Several times the insurance man read through the article, each time gnashing his teeth below his little brown mustache.

At this point his stenographer entered with the first mail of the day, and he impatiently threw down the sheet and waded into the business correspondence before him.

While thus engaged the young lady again interrupted him.

"Two gentlemen in the outer office wish to see you, sir,—the same who called yesterday afternoon. Mr. Gustave Wettlaufer and Mr. Red Schrems, sir."

"Very well; show the gentlemen in here."

Had One-Wing been present he would instantly have recognized in the older of the two men who now were ushered into the private office of the insurance man, the same individual he saw get off the street car at the Battery a little later that same morning. For the new

arrival wore the same kind of clothes, had the same thick neck and small, ferrety eyes, and the same flaming, repulsive countenance that the one-armed Hiker had identified with the man he said put him so much in mind of Red, the tramp.

This man's companion was apparently about nineteen. For one of his youth he was unusually heavy-set, but seemingly quick and active upon his feet, as he crossed the floor and shook hands with the proprietor. This young fellow was rather over-dressed, with a sallow countenance made all the more prominent by his deep-set black eyes.

At a request from Spiess, both men seated themselves. After a few cursory remarks about the weather, the insurance man got up, carefully closed the door, and pulled a chair up close to his callers. Lighting a cigar, and offering one to each of his guests, which they accepted, Spiess and his callers smoked in silence for several minutes.

Finally the man with the red face observed: "Well, Bill, how's the lay o' things to-day? Figgered out yet where yer goin' to put me an' Gus so we kin do a little more good match work in the interests of your good friend, the Kaiser?"

"Hush, Red; not so loud!" cautioned Spiess.

"The girl out there in the other room might hear you. But don't say *my* good friend, the Kaiser. You and Gus are as much German as myself. The Kaiser has loyal hearts in all three of us. We're all willing to do our utmost to pull the wool over the eyes of these trusting Americans, and help Germany, our fatherland, get the upper hand of them and the rest of Europe, I take it."

"Particularly so since there's good pay in it for us," grinned the younger of the three.

"Good pay be blowed!" growled Red, with a surly shake of his bull-like head. "We don't git half enough, Gus, fer the risk we take. Burnin' barns in these times means long imprisonment, if not death, fer any German that's caught at it. Bill, you got the say over this pay, accordin' to my way of thinkin'. Now, why can't you give me an' Gus a decent thing?"

"I'll do what I can," promised Spiess. "You fellows must remember that I am merely an agent of the Imperial Government, engaged to look after the destroying of American crops and the hinderance of Red Cross benefits, and as I have a lot of men like you scattered about in different states to pay, it's a lot of money I have to handle, and if I am not careful I will get into trouble with our own authorities. But I'll agree to raise you both fifty dollars a week, if you handle your next jobs all right."

"Good!" said Red. "Trust us to do what's given us in bang-up shape. Ain't we used the matches over in Delaware and Otsego Counties to make some nice little fireworks, with never a squib or fizz? But what's next, that's what me an' Gus wants to know."

The insurance man studied a moment. Then his face brightened. "Last night," said he, "I had just about made up my mind to put you in different counties in the western part of the state, but this morning I read something in the paper that may alter these plans considerably. I'll show it to you."

"Read it out loud; I ain't no shucks at readin'," said Red.

William Spiess did as he was bid, going over, in a low tone, the newspaper account of the arrival of the Boy Hikers.

"The young guys were smart to nab those wireless chaps like that, but I don't see how any of this affects us," commented Gus Schrems. "I mean in our business."

"Same here," added Red.

Spiess's anger had returned with the re-reading of the newspaper article. "Hang the young brats!" he exclaimed; "they have done enough damage to our cause now, without doing any more! Can't you see that if they are permitted to return home after the manner of their coming,

as this paper says they plan on doing, they will only add more to the resources of this confounded country in the way of gathered crops and Red Cross money?"

"Looks that way, Bill," admitted Red.

"It sure does," agreed his younger accomplice in crime.

"But how's it goin' to be helped?" asked Red calmly. "Me an' Gus can't touch a match to these here fellers, as I kin see."

"You won't be asked to," said Spiess, with a cold-blooded smile. "But you might touch a match to something else that would be the means of putting a quick halt to their operations," he added significantly.

Both of his listeners stared their stupidity.

"I ain't on yet, Bill," confessed Red.

"I don't get you, either," Gus admitted

"Well, then, I'll explain. You see it's this way: I've made up my mind to call on these boys this very evening at the Berkshire Hotel, where this paper states they are stopping. By some cock-and-bull story I will attempt to dissuade them from this government work on their way back home. If that fails, we will plan in some way to have you two follow them up and make trouble for them. Need I say any more?"

"I'm on," grinned Red, grimly.

"I get you," grinned Gus, equally grimly.

There was some further low talk among the trio of precious German scoundrels, and then the two callers arose and took their departure.

CHAPTER V

AN INVITATION

THE Boy Hikers found themselves quite tired out when they reached their hotel after the trip to Coney Isle. It was one thing to hike along country roads all day long, or work in the fields, or play ball, and quite another to do nothing but go sight-seeing, they discovered. The crowds, the jostling, the frequent starts and stops, the new strain put upon eyes, brain, nerves and muscles, left them quite willing to keep quiet that evening.

Therefore, as soon as dinner had been disposed of, all gathered in the spacious lobby and settled themselves into easy chairs before the big windows fronting Broadway, where they could rest and talk and watch the parade of passersby at the same time.

Presently, during the course of the desultory conversation, Clare Wallace brought up a topic that met with universal interest.

"What's on for to-morrow, fellows? Are we going to go on rubber-necking at the Mournful and Hilarious Wonders of this little village, day

after day, for the next two weeks, as we planned before we got here,—or are we going to look up a job to help the country tantalize the Hun? Those girl and women workers we saw to-day, smiling and sweating in the hot sun of the streets, made me, for one, pretty much disgusted with myself."

"I think we all felt a little of the same shame and unrest," declared Ears candidly. "I still hold the opinion we ventured on our way to the Aquarium this morning—that we avoid playing the part of the slacker and lazy lout while here."

"Now you're talking, Earsey boy," approved big Tiny, slapping the addressed youth with unnecessary force upon the leg, which quickly brought a retaliatory jab of Ears's foot against Tiny's tender ankle and an ensuing grimace.

"I don't see it just that way," said Joe Laporte. "For my part I say we have worked hard enough coming here, and have earned this little two weeks' rest we planned on. If you fellows insist on working every everlasting minute on this hike, out and back—"

"Hold on, Joe!" interrupted Jack. "Not so fast. We don't propose to do any such thing. Although we haven't discussed that portion of it yet, I believe the boys have an idea of working here only part time. At least that is my—"

"No matter," growled Joe; "I'm against it, tooth and nail! I'm plumb tired out from the hike and hard work on the way to New York—"

"You mean from sight-seeing to-day, like the rest of us!" interrupted Grease, while his comrades began to look daggers at the French lad.

Noting that his attitude was fast arousing the anger of all the boys, Joe considered it time to moderate matters.

"Well, have it your own way," he sneered. "Of course, now that I'm with the bunch, I'll abide by any decision of the majority. But you know my sentiments."

"If I didn't know you were so confounded lazy, Joe, I'd say you were a slacker," declared Grease, with all the vehemence of his ample lung-girth.

There were similar indignant remarks from others of the group, all of which Joe ignored by staring speechlessly and frowningly straight ahead out of the window. Of a natural selfish disposition, he had been pampered by an indulgent and wealthy father in a manner that had quite spoiled him for service for others. While he loved America, the land of his birth, above all other countries, his natural laziness and selfishness blinded him to the need for self-sacrifice that his companions now saw so plainly.

The rest of the boys continued to discuss the

topic of employment while in New York, suffering Joe to sulk, for all knew such moods were periodical with him, and that he would come out of them more quickly by being left to his own devices.

So they left him in his chair for a few minutes, while they went across the lobby to consult with the hotel clerk about the subject uppermost in their thoughts just then.

This was the same official who had allowed them to go up on the roof that morning. He was a pleasant-looking young man, and listened courteously and attentively while Jack, as spokesman, placed their situation and desires before him. "Have you any idea where we could find this kind of employment?" asked Jack, finishing up. "We would like to get a job somewhere where we can all be together, if possible, and where we can work every other day, so that we can see the city in between."

"That's surely a fine spirit, boys—very fine!" said the clerk approvingly. "I'm sorry I can't recall just now where you could get in and render this patriotic service. But there are lots of places, if one knew them. Say, I'll tell you what to do. You call around at the Federal Employment Agency for War Workers after nine o'clock to-morrow morning. They can place you all right."

He gave them the address of the office in question, and they thanked him and returned to their former chairs.

Joe still sat there, as they had left him. But during their short absence he had pulled a package of cigarettes from his pocket, and was puffing upon one of the white tubes, evidently trying to find solace for his ruffled feelings in the deceitful, soothing effect of the tobacco.

The French boy's addiction to cigarettes was not unknown to his companions, none of whom had acquired this pernicious habit of youth themselves. But this was the first time any of them had seen Joe smoking since the organization of the Hikers Club, one of the by-laws of which prohibited the use of tobacco by any member. However, he had managed to secretly use the weed on several occasions on the trip to New York. Doubtlessly, he would not have allowed himself to be caught in the act of smoking now had he not felt in such an ill-temper and expected the boys to be gone longer.

As it was, Jack Westwood was one of the first to observe this transgression of the Club rules by Joe.

The young leader of the Boy Hikers stepped in front of the smoker like a flash, and looked condemningly down into his dark face.

"Joe Laporte, what does this mean?" demanded Jack.

"Well," snarled Joe, "a fellow's got to have some comfort, hasn't he? What's a little cigarette once in a while? It isn't going to make you fellows all crazy, I hope."

"Not as long as we leave them alone," said Jack grimly. "It's the fellows who smoke the 'little cigarette' that have to watch out about going crazy! More than one lunatic or imbecile in the asylums got there by patronizing these things, a warden of one of the institutions told my father."

"I'll bet it wasn't due entirely to that," was the disbelieving reply.

"Form your own opinion, of course," continued Jack, "but I'm sorry for any one who smokes these 'coffin nails.' It was only this morning that I read in the *Herald* about a sixteen-year-old-boy in Detroit who just died, a cigarette victim. It said he had smoked since the age of nine, and that when they told him there was no hope he hid his face in the pillow a minute, crying bitterly, and then begged to live long enough to warn his young friends who had also taken up the habit, and tell them how foolish they were and what a terrible thing they were doing. After it was all over, the doctors made an examination. They found their diagnosis correct. The cigarettes had destroyed half the boy's heart."

"Let me add something to that," put in Clare. "I don't know as you all know it, but I have an uncle in the West who is a physician. In a visit with us one time he told me that cigarettes contained two powerful poisons—nicotine and empyreumatic oil. He said one drop of the nicotine would kill a full-grown dog, and two drops of the empyreumatic oil would finish a cat quicker than you could turn around. He said that when you draw cigarette smoke into your lungs these poisons immediately begin their damaging work upon your heart, your stomach, your blood, your brain, your nerves and your spinal column, and other organs that are trying their level best to make a boy grow up into a strong man. Because these forces are so tender in a boy, growing the same as he is, they are easily affected, my uncle told me, and his health is ruined much sooner than a grown man's would be."

"Here's a bit from me, too," added Tim O'Toole, with an earnestness in his usually jolly Irish face that brought recognition from Joe in spite of himself. "I'm sure ashamed to own it, but I have a cousin going on twenty who isn't much bigger than a good-size, respectable woodchuck. He has smoked cigarettes since he was ten, and they stunted him so he hasn't taken on more than an inch or two ever since. They've

also got his nerves so his hand shakes like an old man with the palsy, and he can't drink without spilling some of the water out of his glass."

It is uncertain just how many more experiences of personal friends with the deadly weed the Boy Hikers would have recalled, had not there come just then, to poor Joe's intense relief, an interruption.

"Pardon me, young sirs," said a smooth, ingratiating voice from behind, "but am I to understand that I am addressing the Boy Hikers?"

Looking quickly around, they beheld a long, meally-complexioned face, adorned with nose-glasses and a little mustache, smiling apologetically at them. The stranger had approached without being observed during the spirited discussion, and had stood for some minutes, a keen and interested listener, before making his presence known to the boys.

"I asked the clerk for the leader of the Boy Hikers, and being busy at the moment, he directed me over here," continued the gentleman, easily and affably. "I trust I do not interrupt at an inopportune time, young gentlemen?"

"It is all right, sir," spoke Jack, hoping for Joe's sake, in the magnanimity of his heart, that the trend of the recent discussion had not been grasped by the new arrival. "My name is West-

wood, and I am sort of heading our little bunch. Do you wish to speak with me alone?"

"Oh, no," was the hasty response; "my mission is not one of any great importance, and can be handled right here in the presence of your comrades as well as anywhere else. I am a reporter on the staff of the *Evening Mail*. I have noticed an account of your arrival in the *Herald*, one of our enterprising contemporaries, and thought I would look you up and see if I could not get a little information about your plans for returning to your home."

"You are welcome to whatever information of that kind we are able to give you, sir," assured Jack. "What is your name, sir?"

"Oh, a thousand pardons for the oversight. It is Spiess—William Spiess."

He extended his gloved hand, after transferring to the other an ivory-tipped swagger-stick which he had been jauntily swinging. Jack shook hands, followed by the rest of the crowd, whom he introduced by name.

Then the oily-tongued German took a chair which Jack proffered, and ventured with a feigned enthusiasm: "That was a great trick you boys pulled off on those German wireless spies on your way to New York. Our managing-editor thinks you are wonderful kids."

"If he knew us better, he'd change his mind,"

said Tiny, with a grin. "We're just the common, every-day variety. Luck was with us in that instance, that's all."

"Your modesty is that of all heroes," went on Spiess, with a smile that was meant to appear very admiring. He took out of his pocket a notebook and pencil. "Are you boys going to be in our city very long?"

"About two weeks, I think, sir," said Jack.

"What will you do during that time—just look around?"

"A portion of the time, probably."

"Most of the fellows want to work, odd days," interjected Joe sourly. Then, hoping for a possible sympathy which he could not get elsewhere, he added: "Don't you think it a foolish idea, sir? We don't need to do it to meet our expenses. They've just got a hobby on for slaving for the Government every blessed chance!"

"Um-m-m," said the pseudo reporter, non-committally. "I should say that depends. Are you boys going to play baseball on the way home and turn over the profits to the Red Cross, as I understand you did coming?"

"That's the plan," responded Jack, with satisfaction and anticipation glowing in his steel-gray eyes.

"And going to assist farmers gather their crops, too, I presume?"

"That's the ticket," assented One-Wing, while several others nodded their agreement.

"Um-m-m," demurred Spiess, reflectively and sagely. "Now that's a very fine thing to do, boys. It is patriotic, noble, admirable. But I am afraid you do not know the inside facts about this farm service and Red Cross Fund business as I do, otherwise you would not waste so much of your time on them."

His hearers looked at him in astonishment.

"How *wasting* our time, sir?" demanded Jack resentfully.

"Yes, *how?*" came from two or three others.

"Easy now; don't get excited," laughed Spiess, with apparent good-nature. "You see we newspaper men learn a lot about the true conditions of national and international issues that the public in general never suspects. The truth is, the public is often misled for various diplomatic reasons. Now it happens that our financial-editor just recently told me that the Red Cross has a larger surplus of funds with which to carry on its war work than it can ever use in five years. As for crops, he told me," lied the man, "that this has been the greatest year for crops in the history of this country, and that thousands of bushels of grain, and thousands of tons of hay, will just rot in the barns. Really, young men, I think your comrade here is tak-

ing the sensible course when he objects to working after this manner. You see, the unimpeachable statistics of our newspaper financial service prove it."

Needless to say, the boys listened to these assertions with profound surprise. Spiess, older, adroit, and cunning business man that he was, had thought to make a winning impression upon his young listeners. But he quickly found that they were not as gullible as he had anticipated they would be. His keen, searching gaze upon the nine faces that surrounded him could single out only one that gave him hope. That one was Joe Laporte's.

Disbelief was strong in the young leader's eyes, as he said: "I don't want to be impolite, sir, but I can't believe a thing like that! There must be some mistake. Anyhow, I want to say right here that if the rest of the fellows feel like I do about it, we are going right on with this work on our way back across New Jersey!"

"We're with you, Jack, old man," supported One-Wing, Ears, and in fact all except Joe, who was silent.

Spiess was quick to see that he could gain nothing along this line, and so made immediate efforts to extricate himself gracefully, and to advance another line of appeal.

"I admire your loyalty, boys," he said. "Per-

haps, after all, there is an error in those reports. Newspapers sometimes are misled by innocent informers. May I ask what towns you propose passing through on your return trip?"

"We cannot tell that now," said Jack. "Our schedule has not yet been arranged."

"Will you let me have it for our paper when it is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. By-the-way, how would you all like to attend the ball game at the Polo Grounds to-morrow afternoon, between the Giants and Chicago? I plan to attend, as I must report the game for my paper, and will be happy to present you with complimentary tickets."

Jack put the invitation up to his companions. It was decided to accept the kind offer of their caller, and he took his departure shortly afterward with the promise to meet them at the hotel at two o'clock the following afternoon.

After he had gone, the Boy Hikers freely expressed to one another their pleasure at the anticipated privilege of seeing a real big major-league game by two of the leading teams, although somehow there was a sort of bitterness about the joy of it all that none of them could exactly explain.

Joe was probably the only boy who did not

share in this opposing duality of feeling. He was, of all of them, the most cheerful and happy.

And, strange as it may seem, it was the remembrance of Joe that made Spiess, the German secret agent, fairly well satisfied with the results of his call, as he took a taxi to his apartments that evening.

"I've got an idea that chap is the one who is going to play into my hands and help me bring his obstinate chums to grief," was the man's thought. "I must make every effort to-morrow to get into the young fool's confidence."

CHAPTER VI

JOE FINDS SYMPATHY

TRUE to his promise, Mr. William Spiess, self-styled reporter of the staff of the *Evening Mail*, called at the Berkshire for the boys the next day at two o'clock sharp.

He found all of his prospective guests awaiting his coming in the lobby, some reading papers and others talking.

These occupations were immediately dropped as soon as the boys saw their acquaintance of the previous evening crossing the floor toward them. Spiess was nattily dressed in a Palm Beach suit of expensive quality, a Panama hat, and white oxfords. He jauntily carried the same swagger-stick they had observed in his possession at the last meeting, and he came forward and shook hands with the utmost show of good-nature and cordiality.

"How are you, boys?" he greeted. "I'm glad to see you looking so well. I thought a short time ago that I would be after the hour in meeting you, as I have just been interviewing ex-President Roosevelt in regard to a lecture he contemplates giving in the city, and—"

"I thought I read in the papers that Mr. Roosevelt left for Maine yesterday," said Jack.

"Possibly you did, young sir,—possibly you did," was the quick and smooth reply, with an extension of the smile; "but that is a newspaper error. Mr. Roosevelt really did plan to leave for the state of Maine yesterday, but was detained at the last moment by business affairs of importance, and will not get away until this evening. His—er—lecture will be given upon his return here in about a fortnight. But enough of these trivial explanations. I presume you are all ready to go out to the Polo Grounds?"

"Yes, sir; we are quite ready, thank you," Jack returned.

"You are very kind, Mr. Spiess," remarked Joe. "All the fellows appreciate your courtesy a great deal. As you may know, chaps who play baseball themselves, as we do, think it a big treat to be offered a chance of this kind."

"Glad to know it, young man. The complimentary tickets will cost me nothing, as they are furnished to all newspaper men, and I consider it a rare privilege to have your company after the great patriotic service you have rendered our country, the finest land in the whole world!"

The boys commenced to feel ashamed to think

that they could ever have questioned the loyalty of this man, and concluded that they must have entirely misjudged his motives in attempting to dissuade them from future Red Cross work. This feeling was made all the more pronounced when, as they passed out of the hotel and down the street, the gentleman remarked:

"I trust you have not given up your idea of putting in some of your spare time here in doing a little work?"

"No, sir," answered Jack, who with Joe walked beside Spiess, the others following. "We are all strong for that—with one possible exception."

"I'm that one," vouchsafed Joe, boastfully, himself announcing that from which Jack would have preferred to shield him. "The fellows went this afternoon to the Federal Employment Agency for War Workers to look up something, but I don't believe in killing myself entirely with work, and so stayed at the hotel and played pool."

"Did you secure employment?" asked Spiess, addressing Jack.

"Yes, sir; we did. We were lucky enough to find an engagement with a big packing company on the piers who have large Government contracts to fill. We are to work every other day, beginning to-morrow."

"What is the name of this concern?"

"I can't recall it, sir."

"Well, no matter," said Spies, disappointed beneath his exterior of indifference. "What sort of work are you to do?" he added.

"The employment agent said we were not to divulge that, or talk about our work to outsiders in any shape or manner, sir," was Jack's respectful reply.

The false reporter bit his thin underlip. But he was careful to maintain his apparent disinterest in the subject by saying: "The agent is wise. There are so many German spies in America that a person must keep his own counsel about such matters. Well, here we are at Bleeker Street. We will go upstairs and take the first elevated train out to the Polo Grounds."

Mr. Spiess insisted on paying the fares at the wicket, and soon all were comfortably seated in an elevated train which would take them to the ball-grounds just beyond One Hundred and Fifty-fifth Street on Eighth Avenue.

It was a long ride, and one thoroughly enjoyed by the boys, the majority of whom had never been on the "L" cars. It was decidedly novel to be able to speed along like the wind, as high as some of the lower roofs, to gaze out into the second-story open windows of numerous big office buildings and stores, and to look down

into streets below thronged with scampering children, hurrying men and women, and divers honking automobiles and rattling vehicles.

In one place, after they had swept around West Fifty-Third Street into Ninth Avenue, amid a great shrieking of sirens several fire engines and long red hook-and-ladder trucks dashed by. A few minutes later the elevated train passed a burning four-story building where the helmeted rubber-coated firemen were battling the flames in the midst of a rapidly gathering throng of excited spectators.

Shortly afterward they were carried so close to Central Park, and ran parallel with it so far, that they had quite a fine view in general of its great expanse of beautifully-kept grounds, waterways, buildings and shrubbery. Following, came several smaller notable rest-spots of the city, along their own thoroughfare, whose closeness made it possible to view them even to better advantage. Among the larger of these was Morningside Park, with its pretty curving drives and splendid foliage, also St. Nicholas Park whose northern end encompasses the buildings and fine campus of the College of the City of New York.

During this ride, the host of the boys had, by apparent chance, managed to secure a seat next to Joe, much to the latter's satisfaction. Along

the way, Spiess made himself unusually agreeable to the French boy, explaining elaborately many of the views that were witnessed from the car window, and telling amusing incidents of city life of which they seemed to remind him.

Altogether, by the time they had reached their destination and left the train, Joe thought the bogus reporter one of the most entertaining and wonderfully well-informed gentlemen he had ever met.

Had the boys seen the tickets that Spiess handed in at the ball-grounds gate they would have noted that they were not marked any differently than those relinquished by the many other people entering, and their suspicions perhaps aroused as a consequence. But Spiess was careful to avoid this danger, and pushed ahead, handing the pasteboards in quickly.

They were given a small block of excellent seats in one of the big grandstands. It is quite unnecessary to state, I suppose, that they enjoyed the game that followed. None of the party had ever before seen a National League contest, and this snappy game between the New York and Chicago teams proved absorbingly interesting to them, the Giants eventually gaining the mastery by the score of four to three.

"That was a great game," commented Jack, as they came out of the park. "What perfect

grounds these big league fellows have! Their diamond and outfield is as level as a floor."

"Not much like some of the grounds we have had to play on coming across New Jersey," put in One-Wing, with a grimace. "We played games where it was so rough, almost, you needed a step-ladder in order to surmount the knolls, an' a rope to get down into the hollers, so help me!"

Spiess, who had seemed to be too busy taking down notes of the recent game to talk much, laughed as he folded his book and put it in an inner pocket. "I am glad you boys enjoyed it," he said, in an off-hand way. "It was a very common contest to me, but of course I'm used to them and you are not. What do you say to taking the subway home, for a change? We can get it at One Hundred and Forty-Seventh Street and the Harlem River—a matter of less than ten minutes' walk from here, and it will take us right down town."

This plan met with instant approval from all.

In a short time they reached the terminal subway station which their host had mentioned. In order to gain the tracks they found it necessary to descend several flights of broad steps, well down below the surface of the street. Here were large, clean waiting-rooms, offices, news-stands and boot-blackening-stands on a scale to quite surprise them.

Ears bought a box of chocolates, which he passed around, and then they sat down to await the first train.

"A few years ago these subways were quite as novel to the people in New York as they no doubt are to you now," remarked Spiess, in answer to several questions. "They do an enormous business, carrying an average of more than a million and a half people every day in the year."

"Wow!" ejaculated Tiny; "I thought you were going to say 'every year.'"

"No, indeed, young sirs; every day. Statistics prove it. Every passenger who enters New York on the steam cars, or leaves it, must pass through some one of these great tunnels that thread the underground beneath the city. The Harlem, near by; the Ship Canal at the north end of Manhattan, the East and the Hudson Rivers, are all cut by subways. Besides there are several lines that tap the heart of the city itself, and some, like this one, reach well out."

"I have heard that some of the big stores connect directly with these tunnels, sir; is that true?" asked Jack.

"In every respect. Many of our larger department stores, theaters and hotels are thus connected," continued Spiess, who was in reality well-informed upon this subject. "It

may seem incredible to outsiders, but last winter a family of three from San Francisco who were visiting here, lived for two weeks in one of the most fashionable and expensive hotels, spent most of their time shopping, sight-seeing and theater-going, and not once during that time did they pass into the outer world. From their rooms in the hotel they were dropped by elevator to the level of the subway. Through the subway they went to department stores, theaters, restaurants, museums, and even to church. The fact is, when they started for their home out West, they went by subway from their hotel to the Grand Central Station of the New York Central Railway lines, and did not get out into the sunlight until they were in another State."

"That must have been done on a bet," ventured Tim.

"They say not. It probably has been done many a time and not recorded. But here comes our train."

At that juncture an electric train consisting of several olive-painted, steel-shelled cars, glided up to the platform nearby. There was an immediate rush of people to get on, and our party found themselves virtually carried into one of the cars with the tide of humanity.

Joe, much to the satisfaction of Spiess, kept near the city man, evidently hoping to be

avored with a seat next to him on the return. If so, the French lad gained his wish, for in that jostle the boys found it quite impossible to keep together, and when all had found a berth they were pretty well scattered, with Joe and Spiess several seats away from the nearest of them.

Nothing could have pleased the German secret agent better. It was with difficulty that he could restrain an exclamation of pleasure.

"I think your companions are a fine lot of fellows, young man," ventured Spiess presently, as the train sped along through the artificially lighted tunnel. "It would please me better, however, if they would drop some of this Government work, and have more time to enjoy their little stop here in the city. And then, too, at your age a young man should be thinking somewhat of the future. When he gets a chance to earn considerable money, as you have been doing playing ball on your trip, he ought to either spend it in advancing his knowledge of the world, or put it in the bank to assist him in a profession in later life."

"Just my idea exactly," declared Joe sententiously. "As you say they are a good enough bunch all right, but all-fired foolish about this working stuff. When I started out with them I thought it wouldn't be so hard. But I'm

getting plumb tired and sick of it. For two cents I'd drop them."

The eyes of Spiess glowed beneath their sandy lashes. That was the kind of talk he liked to hear!

"It seems to me they are a little hard on you," he purred. "For instance, I noticed last evening that they seemed to be taking you to task for smoking a cigarette. Personally I couldn't see any occasion for that."

"Thank you, sir. I wish they were half as sensible as you. I'll admit they nearly scared the life out of me with their arguments, for the time. Jack is the worst on that score. He hates and despises the sight of a cigarette, but the other fellows are nearly as silly."

"Is this Jack a good ball player?"

"He thinks he is," sneered Joe. "He is so stuck on his pitching that he tried his best to keep me out of my turn on the slab on our way here. But I won't stand it going back!"

"Do you pitch, too?"

"Yes, sir; I'm 'change' with Jack on our team."

Spiess was silent for a few moments.

"You have given me a thought, young man. I will tell you something confidential if you won't mention it to your chums."

"I won't say a word," promised Joe.

But the self-declared reporter hesitated and glanced around at the passengers near them.

"On second thought, I believe I had better not say what I was going to right here," he stated in a low voice. "It is a big idea, with lots of money in it and a whole lot of glory for some young chap who is a good pitcher, and I don't want any one to hear it until my plans are matured. I wonder if you could not meet me to-morrow morning at ten at my office—"

"*Your* office?" queried Joe in surprise. "I didn't know reporters had offices of their own."

"Ordinarily they don't," smiled the man, "but all my time is not taken up by my special reportorial duties, and I carry on, with engaged help, a real estate and insurance business, as a little side issue. If you will call at Room No. 817, in the Knox Building, at Broadway and Fulton Streets, at the time I named, I may have something of great profit for you to hear. But you must say nothing about this to the other boys."

Joe's curiosity and interest were much aroused.

"They're going to work in the morning, and expect me to go with them," said he. "But I'll play up sick, and meet you."

"Good!" was the answer.

CHAPTER VII

A DISGRUNTLED REVENGE

"SAY fellows, I'm all in this morning. Don't believe I feel well enough to go to work with you."

It was Joe Laporte who made this remark early the following morning, as the Boy Hikers appeared at the breakfast tables of the hotel after a rather hurried toilet.

They looked at Joe's healthy-looking dark face in surprise. The French lad did his best to put on a troubled, drawn look which he hoped would pass muster.

"I've got a beastly bad headache," he explained, blushing a little at the bare-faced lie.

As he spoke he closed his eyes wearily and rubbed his forehead with his hand.

"In that case," said Jack sympathetically, "I believe myself that perhaps it will be better for you to stay here and rest up. You will probably be all right by night."

Jack said this not without a vague distrust, knowing, as did his companions, Joe's aversion to hard work; but he did not wish to do him a

chance injustice, and made every effort to silence his doubts as to the genuineness of Joe's complaint.

However, when during the midst of the meal, it was noticed that the French boy was eating about as heartily as anybody, some of the other members of the party who were more blunt-spoken than their young leader, chaffed him considerably, until finally Joe's angry retorts compelled Jack to ask his friends to desist.

As soon as his comrades had left the hotel, Joe's woe-begone look vanished instantly. He glanced at the clock, then noting that it was only a little after six picked up a newspaper in the lobby and tried to interest himself in its contents. He was not entirely successful in this endeavor, probably owing to a very guilty conscience, but managed to put in the time until almost eight, when he threw down the paper impatiently, and strolled into the billiard-room.

Here he frittered away a little more than an hour and a quarter over a game of pool with a rather dissolute youth of about his own age who had registered the day previous. He now reminded himself, with a feeling of great relief, that it was time for him to start out to keep his appointment with Mr. William Spiess, at Room No. 817, Knox Building.

From the clerk he obtained directions for

reaching the place, and within twenty minutes a Broadway surface car had brought him to Fulton Street.

Joe did not suspect that while he had been hanging around the hotel waiting for this hour to come, Spiess himself had been closeted in his private room on the eighth floor with those two rogues, Red and Gus, and that the three had agreed upon a scheme in which he was to play the scapegoat toward the ultimate injury of his comrades and the Government. No, of course Joe did not dream of this. If he had known the true condition of affairs—known that the supposed brilliant reporter of the *Herald* was in reality one of Germany's most crafty and valuable spies in America—he would have placed as great a distance as possible between himself and that polished gentleman.

As it was, he went cheerfully up to the eighth floor in the elevator, and knocked confidently upon the door of No. 817. A glance at his watch showed him he was exactly on time. It was ten o'clock to the minute.

A lady's voice bade him enter, and he found himself in the main apartment of the insurance man's business premises. The young lady within looked up from her work upon some ledgers. She seemed to be the only occupant of the prosperous-looking room.

"Is Mr. Spiess in?" asked Joe. "He told me to call here at ten this morning to see him. My name is Joe Laporte."

"He told me that he expected a young man by the name of Joe Laporte at ten," was her answer. "He is in his private office with two gentlemen, but you are to go right in."

She indicated the door, and Joe turned the knob.

Sure enough, Mr. Spiess and two men were within. The trio were engaged in a conversation that seemed to do with baseball, for, as Joe hesitated awkwardly in the doorway before advancing, he heard the supposed reporter remark, as if finishing up some previous statement: "Yes, gentlemen, baseball is a great game, and with the outfit of top-notch players we are acquiring, the 'Atlantic Independents' are sure to create a sensation in these parts this summer."

The French lad did not know that the sharp and expectant ears of Spiess had heard his inquiry the moment he entered the outer apartment, nor that it had been arranged between himself and his callers to mislead him in this manner as to the true import of their presence, but as the reader will suspect, this was the case.

"Why, good-morning, my young friend! I am glad to see you so punctual," observed

Spiess, rising and shaking Joe's hand with a great show of pleasure. "Allow me to make you acquainted with two other baseball men—Mr. Gus Wettlaufer, here at the right, and Mr. Red Schrems."

Joe acknowledged the introductions, and was given a chair. He observed that the strangers were well-dressed and was much impressed by the cordiality of their greetings, if not their faces.

"I wonder if they belong to the Giants?" he mused. Joe was not a good reader of character. Like most boys of a selfish and bigoted nature what little skill he did have in this line was likely to be blinded by any form of flattery offered him.

"You are extremely lucky, Joe, to happen in just at this time," said Spiess. "In another moment Mr. Wettlaufer and Mr. Schrems would have been gone, I expect. They are old friends of mine, both former big league players."

"Oh, is that so?" Joe was vastly impressed. He considered himself fortunate, indeed.

"Yes, I played third-sack for Pittsburgh all season up till a few weeks ago," volunteered Red.

"And I held down the middle pasture for the Browns," said Gus carelessly.

"I have engaged both gentlemen, who were

‘farmed out,’ for a cracker-jack independent team that I am organizing,” explained Spiess. “This brings me to the little business I was to have with you at this meeting. Since Mr. Wettlauffer and Mr. Schrems are both in on this deal, perhaps you would not object to their continued presence while we discuss it?”

“No, sir; not at all,” said Joe hastily.

“Here, join us in a little smoke while we talk,” remarked Spiess. He took a cigarette-case from his pocket and passed it to Joe, who weakly accepted a tube and lighted it, together with the others. Had he not felt so greatly flattered by the distinguished company, as he took it, in which he found himself, it is doubtful if he would have smoked the cigarette; for the sensible arguments of his team-mates a day or two before, when they had caught him smoking, had really alarmed him, and he had made up his mind to quit the weed for good.

But, like all boys who take up smoking, his common good sense and will power were quite incapable of saving him from the mesmeric power of an offer of tobacco from companions whom he feared might inwardly or openly laugh at him for refusing, especially older companions who apparently had made a mark in the world through skill of brain and hand. It is from the ranks of just such weaklings as Joe Laporte

that old King Tobacco reaps his annual grist of victims!

"Now, my young friend," said Spiess, flicking the ashes from his cigarette with an adroit finger, and gazing into Joe's face with his weak-blue eyes, "I am about to make a great proposition to you—one that doesn't come the way of the average young ball-player of your age. It is this: As I stated a moment ago, I am organizing a first-class independent baseball team. It is a little late in the season, but there's a whole month ahead of us yet, and I figure there's a lot of money in it if I get the right kind of team together, and I am certainly going to do that. I am now arranging dates with different well-known resort teams along the Atlantic coast-line, such as Long Branch, Brighton, Atlantic City, and so forth."

"Some class to all them fellers," commented Red, wagging his bull-like head. "It's an honor to beat 'em, believe me, sonny; but we're the lads to do it, an' don't you fergit it, neether."

"Mr. Spiess knows how to pick out the likely team of ball players, even if he ain't a player himself," declared Gus emphatically. "You play some, don't you, Joe?" he added familiarly.

"Yes; I play with the Boy Hikers," said Joe. "I'm the chief pitcher of the team."

This was a boastful fabrication, as the reader of previous adventures of the Boy Hikers well knows, as the French boy was merely secondary change, with Jack Westwood as leading pitcher.

"Laws of Lazarus, you don't mean it!" cried Gus. "Why, I've read of the great doings of the Boy Hikers! Wish we had a chap like you. Say, Bill—Mr. Spiess, I mean—don't we need a good first-pitcher?"

"We do," said Spiess, immensely gratified that Gus was carrying out his part in the little subterfuge so well. "I was just going to propose to Joe here that he sign up with us."

"What will you offer me?" asked Joe, his heart beating wildly at thought of the honors of the diamond that seemed to await him. He would almost have been willing to serve as first-pitcher for nothing if he could land a berth of the kind with so promising an organization as this, he told himself. But he thought it best not to appear too eager.

"Well, let me see now," reflected Spiess. "How would two hundred and expenses strike you?"

Joe's breath almost left him. What a chance for a sweet revenge upon his old team-mates for not better appreciating his sterling abilities!

"That would mean just for the month of August, I suppose?" asked the French boy, with

an unsuccessful effort toward concealing his elation. "I have to be back at school early in September."

"Our season will end September first, so you will be all right as far as school goes," replied the false reporter. "I will give you a check for one hundred dollars which is half of your salary, right now, if you will sign up with us."

"I'll do it," declared Joe.

"Good boy!" said Gus.

"Yer the guy!" said Red. "Me an' Gus took a sort o' likin' to you the minute we set eyes on you. I'm tickled to death you've joined up with the 'Atlantic Independents.'"

Joe signed a typewritten form of contract that Spiess now drew from a pigeon-hole in his desk, and received in return a check drawn on a local bank for the sum agreed upon.

"When do I see you again, Mr. Spiess?" asked Joe, rising to his feet.

"It may be a week or two before I can arrange our playing schedule," was the answer, "and there won't be anything for you to do in particular till then, as I take it you are well in practice now. But I would quit that bunch you've been with right away. They don't use you very well, and they'll probably use you worse if you don't go to work with them on this pier job. How would you like to take a little run up

to Boston and see the sights for a few days or a week? I'll refund all your expenses when you get back."

Joe had long wanted to see Boston, and eagerly accepted the proposition. He bade his new-found friends good-bye, and hurried away.

That afternoon he left a note for his former team-mates with the clerk of the Broadway Hotel. An hour later saw him speeding on the steam cars toward the Hub City.

CHAPTER VIII

STRANGE CONTRASTS

"JUST what might be expected!"

"That's just like Joe!"

"I thought he would play us some dirty trick!"

"Humph! Too lazy to work, I dare say!"

"Well, who cares? We can get along without him!"

"Nice way to leave us in the lurch!"

"Might have said 'good-bye,' anyhow!"

"Or wished us good luck!"

Practically every one of the Boy Hikers had some comment of the above nature to make, when they got back to the hotel in the late afternoon and read the note which Joe had left with the clerk. They had returned from the piers, after a tedious day's work handling heavy crates of war materials, and not one felt in any mood for such intelligence as this note disclosed. It ran as follows:

"FELLOWS:

"I am very sorry, but you will have to get another pitcher for the team in my place. I have signed up with a new

nine here which has nothing but big league players in it, and I'm to be leading slab man at a salary that would make your eyes stick out to hear it.

"JOE."

"That's the same as saying 'good-bye,' I should say," remarked Jack. "We probably won't see Joe again before we get back home, if then."

"He'll turn up in Sterling all right," said Tiny confidently. "If he didn't get back in time for school his father would give him a trimming he'd never forget, I fancy. They say the old gentleman is pretty rough on Joe sometimes."

"Oh, well," put in Clare philosophically, "youth is a period of change. It is the time when an overpowering ambition to acquire the honors and plaudits of a fawning world, to say naught of its dross medium of exchange and barter—silver and gold—assails little boys with the expansive bump of self-esteem. At such times they will desert and discard, relinquish and release, forget and fail, their dear old weeping friends."

"Very eloquent, very eloquent, Pluto!" declared Ears, "but please, *please* don't say '*weeping* friends.' Any time I weep for Joe you can—"

"Bring a tub, eh, Earsey boy?" laughed Grease. "And maybe you would also like a ton or two of handkerchiefs, and have a tin-smith

solder a couple of rainspouts to your eyelids!"

"SAY!" Ears fixed the fat boy with a glare so baleful and threatening that Grease immediately ceased his shrill guffaws and put a respectable distance between them. Here he stood with limp arms and fingers, his huge body shaking with mock fright, teeth chattering, and eyes expanded under his pudgy light eyebrows like two glass buttons.

This little by-play served to relieve the tension of their surprise and resentment at Joe's unexpected action, and after some further talk upon the subject, the substance of which was their wonder how they were to win games on the way back home with only eight men, the boys went to clean up for dinner.

The next day was to be another sight-seeing day for them. This time it was decided to spend at least a portion of the forenoon in going through the district known as Chinatown, where the great majority of the several thousand Celestials living in New York have their abodes and places of business.

So after breakfast the next morning, the Hikers set out in the direction of Pell Street, the main thoroughfare of the Chinese quarter. All were dressed again in their light street wear, for the weather promised to be clear and warm. At the Post-Office, which was almost directly

along their way, they stopped long enough to ask for mail, also to dispatch some cards and letters.

When they emerged, Jack went into a stationer's to purchase a city map, by means of which they expected little trouble in finding their way into Chinatown.

As they were starting on again, their attention was attracted by unusual throngs gathered along Broadway, and by many people entering and emerging from the broad doors of the City Hall nearby. A strange quietness seemed to pervade the busy thoroughfare in spite of the usual heavy traffic going on, and the boys noticed that when people stopped to talk with one another they did so with sobered faces and in lowered tones.

What could be the cause of these crowds, this suppressed excitement and sad curiosity? they wondered.

All at once Jack remembered.

"It is the morning of the funeral of Major John Purroy Mitchel," he informed his comrades. "I remember that the paper stated the cortége was to start from the City Hall this morning. His body, I believe, lies in state now in the rotunda of the building. Shall we go up and view it?"

The majority signified their desire to do this, and joined the hundreds in all walks of life

who were then passing into the big municipal building to pay their last respects to the memory of the city's former mayor, a patriotic American citizen who at the declaration of war had sacrificed all business and political interests and joined the aviation service of his country, only to meet a tragic death by a fall out of his machine upon the southern training-field before his hopes of meeting the enemy in aerial battle could materialize.

In the flower-decked rotunda of the City Hall, our lads stood with bared and bowed heads, like scores of others present, while for a few moments they looked reverently down upon the coffin, draped in the beautiful American colors. Upon its center rested the cap which the former mayor had worn as a major of aviation. Around the remains, some weeping, some very near to tears, others stern and solemn of expression, were the wretchedly poor from the East Side tenements, side by side with the immensely wealthy of the Fifth Avenue and Riverside Drive mansions.

The boys went down stairs, and retired to a position in City Hall Park, to see the funeral procession go by. By this time the park was dense with people, as well as the sidewalk and curbing across the street, and well up Broadway.

When the casket was finally borne from the rotunda, where it had lain in state throughout the night, and placed on an artillery caisson drawn by four horses, the bell in the City Hall tolled a requiem, and the heads of the hundreds within sight were bared.

Then the cortége went slowly up Broadway toward St. Patrick's Cathedral, its passage through the two lines of countless thousands of sorrowing citizens marked by all the solemnity and ceremony of military rites. The caisson was escorted by detachments of soldiers, sailors and marines, three regiments of State Guards, a regiment of police and a platoon of firemen. Behind followed Major Mitchel's horse, with boots reversed in the stirrups, and bearing also his reversed sword. Then came the mourners, distinguished friends from many parts of the world, and military and civic bands marching to muffled drum-beat.

Perhaps the sight that thrilled the boys more than any one other thing, was a squadron of eighteen airplanes, driven by former aeronautic comrades of the departed, which hovered like huge birds over the caisson all the way along the march, dropping flowers upon the coffin.

The boys did not attempt to follow the procession, but soon betook themselves across-town. They traveled slowly, having the day before

them and much of interest to study. The Bowery, clustered with its comparatively low and dingy buildings, where cheap hotels, saloons, music-halls and pawn-shops predominated, and its concourse of rough-looking denizens, particularly held their attention.

"Ugh!" exclaimed One-Wing, as two or three low-browed ruffians slunk by them, with a leer at their watch chains, "I wouldn't hanker none to go through here after midnight all alone."

"Not if we were as prosperous-looking as we are right now," laughed Jack. "Daylight doesn't suit these fellows, but I have heard that they are sometimes bold enough to knock a lone man down and rob him even in mid-day when they get the chance."

Presently they arrived in the Chinese quarter. They found Pell Street to be short and narrow, much like the streets they had read were peculiar to China itself. Here, on either side, were weatherworn old buildings of wood and brick, with small windows, gloomy-looking basements and strange, jumbled perpendicular signs. In front of the doors lounged leather-faced, slant-eyed, wooden-shod Celestials in loose, black sack coats and flapping-bottomed trousers. Others passed them on the sagging walk, gliding along with that peculiar shuffling tread common to the race.

Chinese children played in the street. It was difficult to tell boys from girls, as most of the girls were dressed in trousers and sack coats similar to the garments worn by the boys.

Frequently the Hikers met a Chinaman who was as modernly attired as themselves, and who looked bright and well-educated in the American ways. Most of these were young men, however, who undoubtedly belonged to the better Chinese families of Chinatown and who had attended the public schools, discarding the habiliments of their race as much as possible.

Over in Mulberry Street they became acquainted with one of this type of Americanized Chinese. At the time, they had noticed scores of Chinamen gathering in front of a low building, and crossing the street curiously they stood upon some boxes at the outskirts of the motley throng, so that they might better witness the cause of the disturbance. It was then that the young Chinese in question, who stood nearby, asked in perfect English: "Would you like to know what this means?"

"Indeed we would," said Jack. "Can you tell us?"

"Yes," was the answer. "I have attended such affairs. It is a funeral you are looking at—the funeral of Lee Wang Bang. He it is who was fifty-eight years old, who was the sweet

singer of Chinatown, and who has died of the White Plague. There is scarcely one of my countrymen in New York who has not sat through three long days and nights in the Doyers Street Chinese Theater listening to Lee Wang Bang, dressed like a Mandarin of the Pink Button, chanting the wickedness which was his in life three thousand years ago."

"Is Lee Wang Bang's body in this building now?" asked Ben.

"Yes; that is an undertaker's. The Grand Masons have carried his body here. Yesterday they placed it in a mahogany coffin. Then a fire was started in the basement of the shop. Quickly six Chinese appeared, and Lee Wang Bang in his coffin was carried to this street in the night-time, where he lay with his face upturned to the rift of moonlight blue that came down through between these buildings. The fire was put out, and Lee Wang Bang was carried back to the place in the undertaker's where he had lain, and the six Chinese went quietly away. Now, to-day, at noon, you see many of my countrymen gathering. You will notice that all their hands are in their sleeves. See—now they are moving out of the way! The hearse and carriages come."

The boys noted that the so-called "hearse" was a queer-looking little vehicle, but the

twenty-five carriages that followed it were quite modern. These vehicles stopped in front of the undertaker's, and then they saw six young Chinese, each with a coil of red, white and black cotton around his breast, separate themselves from the crowd and go in the front door. As they did so, two other carriages appeared, each drawn by a pair of white horses. One of these vehicles went before the hearse; the other, behind the line of carriages.

"The six men who have gone into the house are what would be called pall-bearers at an American funeral," explained the young Chinese. "Already within are a number of others who perform other offices. If you could see them now you would see the six Chinese who just went in standing before the coffin of Lee Wang Bang. You would see, I think, the Grand Master look at the dead man and call him thrice by name. No answer will come, and all will bow their heads and wail. Then, without straightening their bodies, the six Lee Yongs will raise their hands, and at a signal from the Grand Master, will rap sharply upon the coffin. When there is no answer then they will wail again, but this time with their arms outstretched. They—"

Just at this point there came a deep, hollow, booming sound from the interior of the little shop.

"It is the sound of the tocsin," said their informer. "The Grand Master within has taken the tocsin rubber and raised it above his head, while two others have held the instrument that is the tocsin itself well up above their heads, and the Grand Master has struck it very hard. Now listen out here. Even they are assisting the Grand Master and his aides inside to drive away the millions of devils from the body of Lee Wang Bang!"

Judging from the weird and unearthly noises now going up in the street about them, the boys thought that surely Lee Wang Bang would never again be troubled by a solitary evil spirit! From every side arose wail upon wail. Intermingled came the harsh and discordant clash of bronze cymbals from the waiting carriages, and the heavy *boom! boom!* of several tocsins, from the vehicles with the white horses.

And now out of the house came the strange procession. Before the coffin walked a young Chinaman hurling aloft many bits of paper which the boys were told were prayers cast at the devils to frighten them out of the path.

"All the way to the Cypress Hills Cemetery, where Lee Wang Bang will be buried with hundreds of joss sticks and more paper prayers, these prayers and the tocsin will be used greatly to protect Lee Wang Bang from the Evil One," explained the young Chinaman at their side.

CHAPTER IX

AN AWKWARD SITUATION RELIEVED

THE Boy Hikers watched the strange procession, as it moved slowly up the street to the accompaniment of continued chanting and wailing and clash of cymbals and booming of tocsins, to say nothing of an almost incessant shower of the paper prayers from the carriages drawn by the white horses. The sidewalks were crowded with mourning Chinese of the district who blended in their own discordant tones. Even the young Chinaman by their side moaned and wailed in a subdued manner, as the peculiar procession passed out of view around the nearest corner.

Then the boys thanked their Celestial friend for the information he had so kindly imparted to them, and wandered back into Pell Street on their way out of Chinatown.

By this time it was somewhat after the noon hour, and all were ravenously hungry. They paused before a shop of conspicuous outward neatness, on the window of which were the

words in English, "Ah Sing Ling, Chinese-American Restaurant, Chop-Suey."

"Let's go in and try a chop-suey," suggested Ears, as they noticed an American or two coming out of the building. "I've heard these Chinks are great cooks at that dish, and I'd like to try it. Who's with me?"

They were practically all agreed that it would be a good plan to try a chop-suey, and that if the food was not relished it probably would at least take the keen edge off their insistent appetites.

So they went into the little establishment, where two or three Chinese waiters were gliding around in white frocks, and took seats at a couple of coverless maple tables whose tops, however, had been scrubbed scrupulously clean.

"It's queer now, isn't it, fellows, that we should run into two funerals of notables, all within the morning, and that they chanced to represent the most ancient and most modern customs," declared Jack, while they sipped a very delicious vegetable soup that the waiters brought them.

"Is funny," said One-Wing. "I feel lucky to have seen 'em."

"Same here," put in Tim. "Say, boys, that wailing made me feel creepy, though."

"The paper prayers are what gave me the

chills. To think anybody in this enlightened day and enlightened country, even a—" Ears, who made this remark, lowered his voice as one of the yellow-skinned waiters slipped by—"a Chinaman, would believe that the scattering of such silly things as bits of paper would keep such silly things as 'a thousand devils' from running away with the soul of the dead!"

"Oh, I don't know, Earsey," objected Clare, looking solemnly over the rims of his glasses at the subject of his remarks; "I don't know! You must remember that it's a terrible thing to have one in your midst who is so wicked he doesn't know that hordes of little devils are playing tag around him all the time. Now when *you* go, poor boy, no one can rightly blame the rest of us for adopting paper prayers—"

Ears could not reach Clare with his hands, as he was on the opposite side of the table; but the sage had forgotten that feet are sometimes retaliatory under such conditions, and he now received on one of his tender shins a jolt from Clare's toe that brought his words to a sudden halt and made him choke upon the soup he was eating.

"Come, children, this won't do," laughed Jack. "Remember your table manners! Really, Clare, I think you are mistaken. We are all such good little things that we never get

naughty, and when the final reckoning comes we'll all go to the Good Place, just like a certain darkey did. Ever hear the story of Rastus and Sam?"

"Never did; fire away; we've got on our gas masks and steel helmets," warned Tiny.

"Well," began Jack, "it seems that when Rastus and Sam died they took different routes; so when the latter got to heaven he called Rastus on the 'phone.

" 'Rastus,' he said, 'how you like it down dar?'

" 'Oh, boy! dis here am some place,' replied Rastus. 'All we has to do is to wear a red suit wid horns, an 'ebery now an' den shubbel some coal on de fire. We don't work no more dan two hours out ob eb'ry twenty-four down here. But tell me, Sam, how is it wid you up yonder?'

" 'Mah goodness! We has to get up at foh o'clock in de mawnin' an' gathah in de stahs; den we has to haul in de moon, an' hang out de sun. Den we has to roll de clouds aroun' all day long, an' sometimes we sprinkles wid a hose.'

" 'But, Sam, how comes it yo' has to work so hard?'

" 'Well, to tell the hones' truth, Rastus, we's kinder shawt o' help up here!'

This anecdote caused a good deal of merriment.

"There wouldn't be such a shortage of help up there with Sam except for chaps like Tiny here," grumbled Ben. "Sam'll get a little relief when I get my ticket."

The boys continued to chat and joke good-naturedly while they ate the chop-suey that was presently brought in to them, and when they left voted the meal a most enjoyable one.

They made their way back into the Bowery, and thence to the Brooklyn Bridge. This they crossed, afoot, stopping midway over the East River to watch some painters at work upon the great steel wire cables of the superstructure. Then they wandered over into the borough of Brooklyn, and finally to the Navy Yard. Here they hoped to gain an admittance, and see the extensive grounds and the big dry-docks where many of America's largest battle-ships and other naval craft are made and repaired; but at the gate a guard told them it would be impossible to gain admittance during the period of the war, and they were forced to go away disappointed.

By this time all were quite tired out, as might be expected, so they made their way back to their hotel, where they spent the remainder of the day in various restful occupations. Ears, as secretary of the Club, and manager of the baseball team, found considerable correspondence to take care of, as he and his mates were

by now instituting every effort to make up a definite playing schedule for the journey back home.

Thus far they had been quite successful in arranging dates through a country to their liking, and only one or two acceptances from towns in the western section of New Jersey were needed to make the program complete.

One evening, several days after the events just narrated, the Boy Hikers had a surprise in the form of another visit from Mr. William Spiess. They were in the lobby again, most of them reading, and had just been discussing the singularity of freshly-chronicled barn fires in several adjoining states, when the dapper supposed reporter walked in.

Spiess was smiling with his usual manifestation of good-nature when he met them, and shook hands heartily, exclaiming at their apparent good health.

"I am more than delighted to see you all looking so well," he declared, accepting the chair that Jack proffered. "I have been wondering how you are getting on, and as I chanced to be going by on a newspaper assignment, and saw you through the window, I thought I would drop in for a few moments."

"We are glad you did, sir," replied Jack. "We know so few here in this big city that we

are pleased to have a familiar face drop in on us, even if we haven't known it very long."

"Those are mysterious barn fires, Mr. Spiess," remarked One-Wing, folding his paper. "Have you been reading about them?"

"Oh, yes, of course," was the response, as Spiess twitched his little mustache, and wiped his lips with a handkerchief, the while he rolled his eyes searchingly from face to face. "Ahem! they do seem to excite a good deal of attention."

"Don't you think there is a strong possibility that they are fired by German agents?" inquired Jack.

"Oh, no; I shouldn't think that," said the visitor. "I think the German scare in this country is over-done. You know it is very dry at this time of the year, tramps are roving about and sleeping in barns, and a spark accidentally dropped out of a pipe in a little hay would soon start a blaze. By-the-way, do I not miss one of your number?" added Spiess. "Were there not nine of you?"

"There *were*, but no more," said Tiny. "One of our bunch—Joe—took it into his head to drop out a few days ago. Now we're short a man."

"Joe? I recall him—a dark-complexioned boy. Hum-m! that is too bad. What is this Joe doing now?"

"We don't know any more than that he left us a note saying he was going to join some independent ball team in these parts," explained Jack. "We haven't seen nor heard of him since."

"I am sorry to hear this. Won't his loss seriously handicap you in playing games on your way home?"

"It sure will," grumbled Ears. "How we're going to win games against such strong aggregations as we're coming up against I fail to see."

"What teams have you arranged to play?"

"So far Elizabeth, Plainfield and Somerville," informed Ears. "We hope to get Flemington and New Hope in a few days, and then our schedule is full."

"Those towns have excellent teams, as I happen to know," remarked Spiess. "You can never defeat them unless you have a complete team. You should get another member to take Joe's place."

"I'm afraid that is easier said than done, sir," was Jack's grim reply. "We can't afford to engage a professional player, and another thing, if we could, these towns, playing all amateurs themselves, would never stand for it. And we don't know where to pick up an amateur who would be congenial and willing to go along and share the hardships of the tramp and field work that will await us."

"Well, now things do look pretty black for you, that's true," admitted Spiess. "If I only knew— Good! The very thing!" He struck the floor by his chair a sharp blow with his swagger-stick, as he brought out the exclamations.

"What, sir?" questioned Jack. The eyes of his comrades framed a like query.

"Why, I believe I know the very chap for you! His name is Gus Wettlaufer, and he is about your age, perhaps a couple of years older. He is a fine young man, and a brilliant baseman or fielder. Only the other day he spoke to me about wishing to go to Pittsburgh to visit an uncle, but said he lacked the money. It strikes me this is a golden opportunity for you."

"Would this Gus Wettlaufer be willing to work with us helping the farmers?" asked Jack.

"Scarcely any doubt of it. He is not lazy, and is very loyal. Shall I have him call and see you—say to-morrow evening?"

"Yes, if you will, and thank you," responded Jack, seeing that his chums were evidently all eager for such an answer.

"My word for it, you won't regret it if you take him on," said their caller, as he arose to go. "Wettlaufer is an all-around baseball player who can hold down almost any position. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

Spiess left the hotel in a most complacent frame of mind. His little game seemed to be working as smooth as glass. Trust this pernicious rascal to carry the news to Gus Wettlaufer!

As for our boys, they too felt good. It was a great relief to think that the gap in their ranks caused by Joe's quitting might be ably filled before they left the city to meet the husky teams along the way back home.

CHAPTER X

THE SUBSTITUTE

TRUE to his promise, Mr. Spiess had Gus Wettlaufer stop in at the hotel the following evening.

Gus was attired with unusual care. His oxfords had been recently polished, his clothes brushed, his tie replaced with a brand new one of banded green and yellow; and prominently displayed upon the back of his right wrist was his proudest possession—a gun-metal wrist-watch. In addition to these evidences of good-breeding, as he considered them, he had not forgotten to put on the most amiable expression of countenance his rather heavy jaw could carry.

According to Gus's opinion, it ought to be an easy matter to make a favorable impression upon a bunch of green country lads with this attention-compelling combination.

He sauntered confidently into the hotel, and swaggered up to the desk.

"My name's Wettlaufer. I want to see the boss of the Boy Hikers, if they're putting up here," said Gus to the clerk.

It chanced that the boys were just coming out of the dining-room. The clerk called Jack over.

"This young gentleman has asked to see you, Jack," he stated.

Jack extended his hand toward the new arrival, as Gus explained, "My name is Gus Wettlaufer, and I've come to see you about joining your organization. Mr. Spiess sent me."

"Oh, yes; glad to meet you, Mr. Wettlaufer; we've been expecting you. Come into the library, and we'll all talk this matter over together. Those are our fellows over there by the news-stand."

Jack led the way across to where his friends were gathered. He introduced Gus, and then all passed into the library, where there were comfortable chairs, and where there would be more privacy.

The new-comer was a trifle disappointed to think that the "green country boys" had acknowledged the introduction coolly and in a matter-of-fact manner, failing entirely to exhibit the excessive gratification at his arrival for which he had looked. But he contented himself with the thought that when they had an opportunity to see him handle the ball and bat they would speedily assert their admiration.

Gus was in reality a very good ball player.

Before he fell into his present nefarious work with William Spiess, he had been a member of several strong independent teams along the Atlantic sea-board, and would probably have held these positions down if it had not been for his erratic habits and love for drink. Spiess, who knew of this latter failing, had particularly enjoined his young accomplice to avoid any show of it while with the Hikers.

"I suppose Mr. Spiess explained to you the predicament we're in?" said Jack as they sat down.

"Yes; he said you were short-handed, and needed a good all-around baseball man to take the place of a guy that quit you," responded Gus.

"What positions can you take care of in good shape?" asked Ears. "Our man who quit played left-field, and was change-pitcher with Jack here. As we won't play consecutive days, Jack can stand it, we figure, to do all the pitching. So if we can get a first-class fielder we will be all right."

"Don't worry on that score. I'll own I ain't much on the mound, but I can shine anywhere else. In left-field I could just eat up everything that came my way," was the applicant's boastful reply.

This was cheering. Although few if any of

the boys fancied the swaggering manner of Gus, they were duly cognizant of the fact that boast-ers are often fairly good players, despite their disagreeable utterances, and that this fellow might be the very one they needed.

Jack now resumed his end of the questioning.

"Where have you played before?" he asked.

Gus mentioned several independent baseball aggregations of prominence, and was pleased to note that his hearers seemed considerably impressed.

"Did Mr. Spiess tell you that we were going out only on a short trip of about two weeks?" inquired Jack. "We live in Sterling, which is in eastern Pennsylvania, and when we get there we will disband the team and resume our schooling. Our games along the way back home provide only our actual traveling expenses, the rest of the receipts going to the Red Cross. We don't like to ask you to play with us without a salary, as we do, but you see—"

"Forget it; that's all right," declared Gus, with a magnanimous wave of the wrist-watch hand meant to advance himself still deeper in the estimation of those around. By a tug at the strings of his memory, and the substance stored therein by the careful and crafty Spiess, he added: "I want to go on to Pittsburgh, to visit an uncle for a spell, anyhow, and as long as I get

enough grub to hike and play ball on, I don't mind. Besides, I'm glad to get a chance like this to help the Red Cross. Bill—er—Mr. Spiess, that is, said you fellows helped farmers, too."

"That's correct," put in Grease.

"We do that forenoons of ball-game days," said Jack. He put the next question in considerable doubt, as he cast his eye over the substitute's loud dress. "I hope you will feel as we do about it, and will join us in this farm work for the good it will do the country."

"Sure; that'll suit me to a T," lied Gus. "Me for the good old United States of Americal I'm going to enlist shortly after I get to Pittsburgh."

"I wish I could," declared Tiny, wistfully. "If I could get dad's consent, I'd join in a minute. You're almost in the draft age, aren't you, Mr. Wettlaufer?"

"You chaps can call me Gus, and I'll call you by your first names. It seems a lot easier. Well," he added, "I'm almost inside; I'm just past nineteen—just far enough beyond to escape it. I wouldn't let nobody draft me. It's a dishonor. I'd volunteer first—like I'm going to do."

"But a good many drafted men are perfectly brave and honorable," stated Jack warmly.

"They are very anxious to help fight the enemy, but often have dependent mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters to look after. For instance, I know a young fellow of twenty-two who had an invalid mother and two younger sisters to provide for. He was wild to go to the front, but did not see how he could do so without causing great suffering to his loved ones. But he was conscripted, nevertheless, because the Government made arrangements to have a patriotic charitable society of the town look after his mother and sisters."

"And I know another young man who lived in our street and was drafted just before I left home," supplemented Ben. "This man had a wife who begged and begged him not to enlist, saying it would kill her. But when the Draft Board found she was strong and able to earn her own living as a stenographer, they took him, and I suppose by now he is at one of the training-camps with a uniform on his back"

"Very interesting cases, gentlemen," stuck in Clare. "Now listen to mine. I know a young man of my town who was also bound in the matrimonial bonds of wedlock. He had no one but his wife. But she was enough. She told him that if he enlisted she would pound him with a rolling-pin. So he didn't. But they came and drafted him. That made her so mad

she used the rolling-pin on him just the same, and beat him up so badly that he hasn't been able to pass the physical examination yet."

"I bet a button if *I* was that chap, and could get into the army, I'd stay there ever afterward!" said Grease with force, while the others laughed.

"Looks as if we were all mighty lucky to be bachelors," commented One-Wing. "What could a poor chap like me do, with only one arm to defend himself, in case a rollin'-pin came a-slashin' arcs an' circles an' ovals around his cranium?"

"Boys," interjected Jack, simply. "We've all got mothers."

Instantly the crowd sobered up. There wasn't a boy there among those nine, without it were unfortunate Gus, who had been robbed of this choicest possession of youth in his infancy, but who would have died for his mother. And now, all at once, somehow, women and mothers seemed synonymous—too much so for further joking, at least.

As manager of the Hikers team, Ears was asked by Jack to decide whether Gus Wettlaufer should become a substitute for Joe on the trip back. Ears looked over the faces of his friends, saw nothing but approval in them, and Gus was thanked for his proffer to accompany

the little band on the return, and duly registered as a temporary member of the club.

It was thought that he could wear Joe's hiking and baseball uniforms, which the latter had left behind.

Only a few more days remained of the boys' stay in New York. During this time the return playing-schedule was completed, and Gus was given a try-out on one of the diamonds of Central Park. On this occasion his work was so good that all felt they had gained a stronger acquisition to the team in accepting him than they had at first thought.

CHAPTER XI

HOMEWARD BOUND

IT was Monday. At the first gray streak of dawn, fully an hour before the deep, still streets of the big city began to echo with the movement of the first early workers, eight very spirited Boy Hikers sprang out of bed, put on the beloved khaki of the dusty road, and replaced in the trunks the street garments they had been wearing for the past two weeks.

When they went down stairs, to get their last meal in New York and to leave orders with the night-clerk for the shipment of their trunks, they found the ninth member of their party awaiting them in the lobby, as arranged. Gus was greeted cordially all around, taken into the dining-room with them, and then the boys returned to the baggage-room, where their packs, made ready the Saturday evening previous, were slung upon their backs, the new boy wearing Joe's outfit.

Good-byes were said to the hotel employes, who wished the youths the greatest good-luck in

their long trip home across New Jersey, following which they trudged sturdily away, wondering just what mishaps and what pleasures lay before them.

They took a subway train under the Hudson River to New Jersey. From here on to the end of their journey, a matter close to a hundred miles, there would be no further necessity for accepting a "lift." This was a pleasing thought to all, as the journey out had thoroughly converted every doubter of the organization—unless we might except Joe—to the joys of long hikes, and all were eager to renew the experience.

Elizabeth, New Jersey, would be the scene of their first ball game, and therefore their first stop. This little city was about eighteen miles distant, and there seemed every likelihood of their reaching it well before nightfall. Indeed, there had been occasions, during the course of the preceding hike, when they had made as much as twenty-seven miles in one day. But that was "going some," as Jack had said, and none of the bunch would have wanted to keep up the gait from one day to another.

They skirted around the upper end of Newark Bay, and crossed the Passaic. They were then well away from Jersey City and deep into the stretches of Nature herself.

To the southward in the direction they were now headed, a pretty country lay. Though almost as level as a floor, unbroken by hardly a semblance of hill as far as the eye could reach, it was nevertheless made beautiful at this time of the year by patterns of entrancing vari-color produced by watercourse, wood, road, building and field. Surrounding it all was the great azure vault of the heavens, from which the bright morning sun sent down a wealth of scintillating rays to bejewel even the homeliest of the rugged rural adornments and make the more favored ones perfectly ravishing.

As if to add to the beauty of the picture, a gentle breeze stirred the golden-tipped fields of grain, the long brown and emerald grasses of the pasturelands, and the outermost cool-green leaves of the trees. This movement gave a peculiar, entrancing weaving effect, as of the waves of the sea, to the whole landscape. The boys removed their felt hats, to let the delicious air blow through their hair and cool their warm brows.

Far up the road ahead, so far in fact that they could just barely make out his human identity, the figure of a man was descried plodding toward them.

The boys amused themselves by making guesses as to the distance this traveler might be.

One Hiker said a third of a mile; another, a quarter-mile; another, a half-mile; another, a mile. Ben thought he must be at least a mile and a half; Gus said he would bet his last dollar the man was two miles from them, while One-Wing and Jack accorded with Tiny, who had estimated one-half mile.

"Well, now that our guesses are all in, how are we going to prove whose is correct? There are enough ventures; somebody ought to have got it right," laughed Jack.

"I'll tell you," proposed Ears, "my shoe is just a foot long. I'll take it off, I'll whisper to that chap yonder to stand still in his tracks, and Grease here will get down on his hands and knees and measure along the road with the shoe till he comes to him."

"Fine!" agreed Grease; "but, Earsey boy, I've a better scheme than that. Your right ear is just a yard long, and if you'll stand on the side of your head and let me push you along, the information we seek will be found a lot quicker!"

As they were talking, the distant wayfarer was seen to turn off the road into an adjoining field.

"There's a way out of it, kids," spoke up One-Wing. "See that tree there where he's goin' through the fence? We'll jest pace from here up to that, take the average of our separate

counts, and figger up. Remember now—a three-foot pace jest as near as you kin hit it.”

So casting aside all jesting, that they might be able to keep more accurate account of their paces, the boys strode onward in longer steps.

When they arrived at the tree by the gate they found, as might be expected, some variation in their totals. But, on the whole, the run was surprisingly uniform, no boy being more than fifteen paces from another. They found the average to be eight hundred and eighty-seven paces, which was equivalent to the same number of yards, or approximately one-half mile.

“I don’t see how you and Jack could figure it out so close, One-Wing,” declared Tim O’Toole, as they went on. And several others expressed a like wonderment.

“I think it was more accident with me than anything else,” laughed Jack modestly.

“I ain’t so ready to admit that, Jack,” defended One-Wing; “I know I based my guess on considerable road experience, an’ I noticed you sizin’ up the clearness of the sky an’ the levelness of the country, too, jest afore you made yer guess. What did you figger on?”

“Well,” admitted Jack, “of course I did calculate some; I always do whenever I can. I have learned from practicing on shorter hikes, when I was quite a young boy, that a man can be

distinguished in level country, and on a road under a clear sky in the morning, with the sun at the observer's back, just about a half-mile. With the sun reversed, that is, in the face of the observer, other conditions similar, the man can be distinguished a less distance, according to the advance of the day. On a sunless day, also, he will not be seen as far, but the seeing distance will not vary as much as on sunny days."

The former young tramp looked admiringly at Jack. "Mighty good observation powers you got, kid. Now kin you tell me how far you kin see a man's legs movin', as he walks, on a day like this, an' such a place?"

"About three hundred yards, I should say."

"Right to the dot. Now lots o' people never stop to think of it, but these things is mighty useful at times. The best hunters and war-gunners are all skilled in estimatin' distances to certain objects in this way. Know how far you can recognize a friend? Five hundred feet."

"I could recognize Grease five miles!" declared Clare.

"If you would talk," retorted the fat boy, "I would recognize *you* twenty-five thousand miles; I wouldn't need to see you!"

The laugh was now turned on Clare

About noon they stopped by the roadside for lunch, and then continued their way on toward

Elizabeth, the outskirts of which they reached about five in the afternoon.

Camp was pitched in a little wood on a hillside a little way back from the road. A small creek ran through the wood at the bottom of the hill, providing clear water for bathing and dish-washing, and Jack sent two of the boys to the nearest farmhouse for fresh milk and a pail of drinking water.

Others of the Hikers busied themselves cutting up fire-wood, while still others pegged down the nine pup-tents in a semi-circle about the camp.

During the course of these preparations, the sound of a distant shot was heard. It came from the lower edge of the wood, and the boys concluded some hunters must be in the vicinity.

Presently Gus was missed.

"Wonder where he is?" said Jack. "I thought he was getting fire-wood with Grease and Tiny Mac."

"He brought one armful in, and we haven't seen him since," stated Tiny. "That must have been fifteen minutes ago. I—"

Tiny stopped, and looked off into the brush. There, coming through the trees toward them, was the subject of their discussion. Gus wore a huge grin of self-approval. In one hand he carried a pistol, and in the other dangled what appeared to be a freshly-killed chicken.

"What do you say to this, guys?" cried the substitute, holding the fowl aloft as he came up. "Pays to be a good shot, eh? Oh, you guys'll live high with me along! Chuck your beans and bacon back in your packs, and get busy picking the feathers off of this beauty!"

Gus flung his trophy on the ground at Jack's feet, and looked at him complacently.

"Gus, did you fire that shot we heard back there at the edge of the woods a short time ago?" asked Jack, with a stern look which caused the smile to quickly vanish from the city fellow's face.

"Sure. What's the row?"

"Whose chicken is this?"

"I'll bank on it it's ours now," grinned Gus. "Fifteen or twenty minutes ago I guess it belonged to the farmer that lives in that brown house over the ridge back of the woods, but the old chick wandered over by the fence where I was looking up wood, and I just popped him over."

Jack stepped up close in front of the young man. He pointed down at the fowl. His steel-gray eyes seemed to have less gray and more steel in them than Gus had ever observed before, and the latter's gaze wavered in spite of himself.

"Gus," said the young leader of the Boy Hikers, "you have shot what didn't belong to

you or to us, and what another man wants. The law calls this theft, and in my opinion it's right! None of our fellows has ever done a thing like that. For the first time *you* are the one to commit such an act while wearing a Boy Hikers uniform. You have dishonored us. There's just one thing you can do to rectify matters. You've got to pick up this chicken and go back to that farmer with me to apologize."

Gus's coarse face clouded with anger at such a speech from a boy three years his junior.

"You go to blazes, you little whipper-snapper!" he cried. "If you won't eat that old chick I will."

"You are going to do as I say!"

"Yes, we'll help you make him do it, Jack!" said several of the boys quickly. Gus's exploit was not to their liking, either.

"Boys," said Jack calmly, as he turned to them, "let this little affair be mine alone. If I can't handle it we'll let it drop." Then facing Gus again he added firmly: "Gus, will you be man enough to do as I asked you?"

"Man?" repeated Gus, with a harsh laugh. "I'm just man enough not to let a little shrimp bull-dozer boss me around!"

"You refuse?"

"Yes!"

Jack's lips compressed into a thin line. His

eyes were all steel now. He threw off his belt, then his flannel shirt.

"What are you going to do now?" blustered Gus.

"Strip if you want to. You've got just a minute. There's going to be a fight, and one or the other of us is going to get licked!"

CHAPTER XII

THE FIGHT

GUS had not looked for such apparent foolhardiness as this. Nor had Jack's mates. Much as the latter knew of the young leader's courage, as demonstrated upon various occasions in the past, they thought they had never witnessed from him such a seemingly utter lack of regard for his own safety. For it was seen that Jack was at least a half-head shorter than his adversary. Gus, too, was of more burly frame, apparently weighing thirty pounds over the younger lad.

"So that's your idea, eh?" crowed the big city fellow, as he stared at Jack for a moment, and then threw aside his pistol and belt. "Well, if you want to scrap over it I'm certainly ready for you. But remember this: Don't blame me afterwards because I licked you!"

"Better dump your shirt, too; it'll get torn," warned Jack.

"You'll never get that close to me," derided Gus, with another coarse laugh. "But I want

you to promise me your friends here will keep out of the fracas. I'll let up when you holler you've got enough."

The boys knew that Gus had misjudged his man; that Jack would never cry "enough" for a cause he thought was right, even if he were pummeled into insensibility. It was this very knowledge that now made them almost frantic to assist him in the subjugation of Gus before measures went any further. Jack seemed to have not one show out of ten of ever conquering his brawny antagonist.

So, as the youth now appealed to them for a promise not to interfere, he had a most difficult time to gain his point. These loyal, true-hearted lads would much rather have been unmercifully thrashed themselves by the big fellow, and protested their reluctance vehemently, almost angrily. But when they saw tears in Jack's eyes they began to realize how earnest he was, and reluctantly gave in.

With Gus those tears had an entirely different interpretation.

"You're starting to cry early," he sneered. "Don't be a baby, Westwood! Remember I ain't insisting on this fight. I'll let you out of it right now if you say so."

Nothing could have dried Jack's eyes quicker than such remarks. All the softness went out

of them like a flash once more, and the steel returned.

"Be on your guard, Gus!" he warned.

"Ready!" challenged the big fellow.

But Gus did not wait for Jack to take the initiative. Freshly angered to think that this youngster should be so headstrong and conceited as even to threaten to attack him, Gus clenched both his fists and let drive with the right at the forehead just above the two steel-gray eyes that seemed to unnerve him so much. He determined he might just as well end the trouble right away and have it over with.

Had his blow struck it might have brought this result about. But it did not. Unexpected as it was, Jack, who was one of the cleverest boxers of the Y. M. C. A. of his home town, had a wary eye out, and ducked it. In retaliation, his own right fist drove forward, and Gus felt a thud upon his shoulder that made him blink like an owl. Except for his excessive weight he would have been sent staggering backward.

The city fellow was astonished. He had not looked for any such thing as this. He saw that his opponent knew something about the science of using his fists as well as he. But Gus had taken lessons of a retired prize-fighter—a regular "bruiser"—and felt positive that when he

would begin to let loose some of the real stuff garnered in these lessons, there would be no further occasion for worrying about the job he had in hand.

He now assumed a more cautious pose.

"You'll regret that punch in a minute, Westwood," he gritted, as several of the boys in the little circle about them gave vent to exclamations of joy. "You've only got a worse drubbing in store for yourself by it. Take that for a little touch-up!"

As he spoke Gus feinted with his right hand, and when Jack made a move as if to protect the threatened spot, his head, Gus stepped in a little closer and shot his left fist hard at the lad's stomach. This was a cowardly blow, quite contrary to all laws of the ringside; but as the reader must have concluded before this, Gus cared nothing for law nor the fairness and justice it stood for so long as he could gain his ends.

While Jack had calculated the other's feint to be such, nevertheless he had not imagined Gus would resort to so foul a blow. On the contrary he had looked for it to be aimed at his heart, somewhat higher, a perfectly legitimate field for any boxer's designs. The result was that he succeeded in only partially warding off the punch. So viciously had it been delivered that what force in it did meet his stomach was

enough to temporarily knock the wind out of him and send him reeling to the ground.

There he lay, doubled up with a nauseating sickness in the pit of the sensitive organ that made him bite into his tongue and shut his eyes to keep from crying out with the terrible pain. He tried to rise, only to sink weakly back again and re-clutch his stomach.

With cries of alarm and indignation and sympathy Jack's comrades were quickly around him, offering every assistance. However, he waved them back. "'Lone, fellows," he groaned. "Be—all right in a—minute. Just wind—gone!"

"What did you hit him in the stomach fer, you dirty dog?" demanded One-Wing, as he angrily faced Gus, his only fist doubled.

"That's it—what for?" cried Ears.

"I didn't mean to, guys," said the city fellow in almost a whine. He was badly frightened at the attitude the boys were assuming, and he had a right to be, for several were now about him with countenances as black as thunder-clouds. "I didn't mean to hit him that low," lied Gus. "I struck for his breast, and slipped a little. I'm sorry. Don't hit me! Remember you said—"

Just here there came an interruption.

"What they said they'd do they will—and

so will I, Gus Wettlaufer! My job is to lick you, as I said. And I'm going to do it! Out of our way, fellows!"

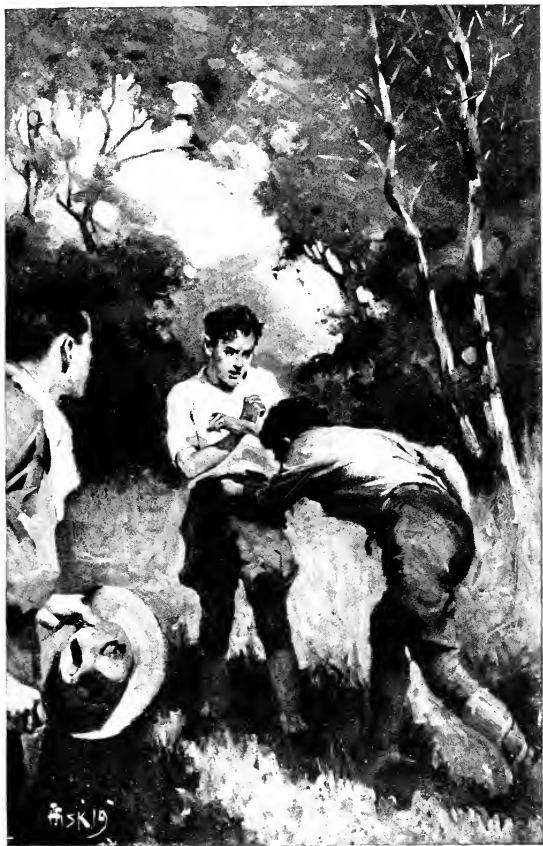
Jack had mastered his temporary derangement. There he stood once more, pale as a sheet, but strong and full of determination.

Involuntarily his friends stepped aside.

The next moment the two combatants were mixing matters again, Jack going after Gus with renewed fire, but not without caution. So fast were the blows given and exchanged for a few seconds that it was impossible for the on-lookers to keep account of them.

Once they saw Jack stagger back again, and noted that his cheek was bleeding. Then they saw him wipe off some of the blood on the back of his hand, look at it, give a queer, challenging sort of laugh, and sail in once more. Out of the mix-up that followed, big Gus was the next one to stagger. From a cut on his jaw, a crimson fluid dripped down upon his collar, at sight of which the burly chap roared his anger and, recovering himself, renewed the attack.

Here and there they fought, thrusting, parrying, blocking, ducking, countering and side-stepping. Several hard body blows were delivered by both boys, one of which all but brought Jack to his knees. But he was up and at it the next moment, and a few minutes later managed to



GUS STEPPED IN A LITTLE CLOSER AND SHOT HIS LEFT FIST HARD AT THE LAD'S STOMACH. — Page 120.

retaliate with a right hook under Gus's sore jaw again.

This time the blow was fairer. Its force also caught the big fellow at a time when he was not well braced to receive it. The consequence was, he went to the ground.

When he struggled to his feet, for an instant Gus seemed dazed and bewildered. He could not conceive how a youth of Jack's size could ever have dealt him such a stiff jolt. He looked at the nearest spectators suspiciously and darkly, as if he thought they might have thrown something at him. But there was nothing in their attitudes to warrant the continuation of such an idea. So Gus finally laid the blame where it rightly belonged.

With temper fairly aflame now, convinced that he never could vanquish his younger adversary by skill of fist, Gus rushed forward, intent on closing with Jack and bringing his greater brute strength to bear.

This was a contingency that Jack knew he must avoid, if possible. So he made every endeavor to keep out of the substitute's embrace, leaping lightly back or aside as Gus would lunge for him, and striking whenever there seemed a favorable opening. These blows in several instances reached their marks, with the result that, although he did not measure his length

upon the turf again, the big fellow's face was badly cut up by Jack's knuckles.

The young leader's face, and clothing too, bore added evidence of the fierceness of the encounter. Blood was dripping from a gashed brow down into one eye so that he could scarcely see with it, and his bare arms were scratched and lacerated in a half-dozen places. As for his undershirt it was almost stripped from him, where the clutching fingers of his adversary had attempted to acquire a retaining grip.

Presently Gus lunged forward for another clinch. Jack made as if to jump aside, as usual, to avoid it. Anticipating a move of this kind, Gus cunningly wheeled in the direction of his adversary's feint and threw out his bulky arms to encircle him. This left him entirely exposed for the moment, from Jack's position, and as quick as a flash of lightning his fist shot out under the jaw, where it had twice landed before.

Big Gus threw up his arms wildly, and toppled over like a bag of salt. He made no attempt to rise, but lay blinking dully and uncertainly about him, with every appearance of not exactly comprehending his condition or surroundings.

A wild cheer went up from the little ring-

side, as the full extent of Jack's strategy and its successful outcome began to dawn upon his adherents. They made a rush to shake his hand, but the battle-torn boy waved them back.

Stooping over the fallen fellow, he gritted between his set teeth: "Gus, I said a while ago I'd lick you. Have I done it?"

There was no answer. The addressed one seemed still too bewildered to either grasp the import of the words or to recognize the speaker. Jack straightened up, folded his scarred arms across his raw breast, and gazed grimly and steadfastly down at the coarse, bruised features and vacant eyes of Gus.

Quite unmindful of his own wounds, or the crimson fluid that blurred and made his one eye useless, Jack continued his unrelentless watch for fully fifteen seconds. Then, detecting a change in the vision of the prostrate youth, he repeated the question: "Gus, I said a while ago I'd lick you. Have I done it?"

"Yes," grunted Gus, weakly.

"Will you go now with me to that farmer and apologize for the dishonor you've brought on my friends?"

"Yes, if I can walk that far."

"Get up; you'll have to!"

Gus arose rather wobbly to his feet. Jack pointed mutely to the cause of all the trouble,

and taking a few steps the substitute picked up the chicken he had shot.

"Now lead the way," said Jack, briefly.

"What! Lookin' like we do?" was the protest. "Believe me, Westwood, we look like a slaughter-house! Can't I wash up?"

"No!"

"But the farmer! He'll wonder—"

"He's the very one to see these marks, Gus. They're all the evidence we'll have to prove our story and your apology sincere. Go!"

And Gus Wettlaufer, with the fowl, led the way back through the woods.

CHAPTER XIII

HARD LUCK

MORNING found our lads astir early. A lone rooster crowing lustily from some point unseen off across the fields, first awoke Jack. He found he was very stiff and sore as a result of his encounter with Gus the previous evening.

But, as he had rolled out of his little khaki tent, awoke his mates with a loud bellow, or a terrific pounding on canvas over their heads, and stirred around with them a little, he found his lameness rapidly vanishing, although the cuts and bruises on his body were of course as touchy as ever.

But there was one big satisfaction—if he were sore of flesh and muscle, Gus Wettlaufer must be in equally as bad a condition; and to break the balance Jack's mind was buoyant with victory and a good reason for his wounds, while Gus's mind could not have held any reason but those of chargin and guilt.

Somehow the young leader, with a little sense of pity for the vanquished foe, could not bring himself to arouse Gus at this early hour and had

passed his tent, after a short hesitation and a peep within at the court-plastered, puffed countenance of the sleeping young man.

The boys all went down to the creek for a dip before completing their dressing, following which the breakfast fires were built, and each member of the party took upon himself the task of cooking his own meal. During the course of this, Gus hobbled out of his tent, dressed slowly, and came up to the fire.

Everybody looked for him to be sullen and disgruntled, but to their surprise and relief, the substitute wore a sickly grin, as he said:

"Guys, I hope you ain't got any hard feelings against me, after what happened last night. I didn't mean any harm by killing that old chick, as I've been sort of brought up that way. But I can see now I was wrong, just as I told the old farmer guy over yonder, and I say let's bury the hatchet and be as good friends as ever. What say, guys?"

"We're perfectly willin' to do that as long as you behave yerself," declared One-Wing, "an' as long as you ain't holdin' no grudge ag'in Jack here."

"Nothing against Jack at all," was the answer. "What he handed out to me I deserved, believe me, Mary! Here's my hand on it, Jack, if you ain't too proud to take it."

Jack quickly grasped Gus's hand, but somehow he could not wring it with the spirit he wished. Since Gus had hit him that treacherous blow in the stomach, he felt he could never feel toward him just the same as he had in the past. In the bigness of his heart, with the city fellow apparently now anxious to do better in the future, he blamed himself for this feeling, yet found it impossible to entirely subjugate.

Gus ate very little that morning, complaining of the pain it caused him to use his jaws in masticating his food. Actually sorry for him, Jack would have sacrificed all of his share of the milk to alleviate this condition had not several of the others insisted on being included in the milk donation, thus reducing the amount relinquished by each to a somewhat smaller fraction.

After the meal Gus announced his opinion that he was too much used up to go out with them for farm-work that morning, and was even afraid he might not be in condition to take his place in the forthcoming game in the afternoon.

"Guess, I'd better lay around camp here, anyhow, till you guys get back at noon," he added. "Maybe I will feel enough better by then to play ball. Hope so, anyhow. It'll be a hot note if I can't, and you lose the game all on my account!"

"That's all right, Gus," consoled Jack, as he and his companions started off toward the road. "If we lose it will be more my fault than anybody's, I'm thinking. Don't leave the camp, and keep an eye on our tents and packs."

Gus promised, and not long afterward the boys were out of his sight. At the first cross-roads, all but Ears turned off the main thoroughfare to seek jobs at the first farms they should encounter.

Ears himself proceeded on in the direction of Elizabeth, where he must look up the manager of the local baseball team and make the final arrangements for the contest. The equipment trunks, containing their uniforms of the diamond and bats, gloves, shoes, etc., must also be sought at the express-office and sent out to the grounds so that everything would be in readiness when the boys themselves arrived there.

The workers found no difficulty in placing their services. As on the hike to New York, they discovered a dearth of farm help. At their first two calls, all of them were gladly and thankfully received, four going to one farm to spray potato plants and pick apples, while on a neighboring section another farmer gave the quartet plenty to do upon a barn he was erecting.

As in previous instances, their employers

wished to pay them for their services but of course not a boy would listen to this.

At noon they were asked to remain to dinner. These kind invitations they accepted, enjoying the most excellent repast in both cases, then hurried back to camp, carrying with them various fresh vegetables and fruits which the good housewives were insistent they should do as soon as they learned they would supper and breakfast in the woods before resuming their journey the following day.

They found Gus lying down in front of a fire, when they arrived, idly whittling a stick. Though not feeling any too spry himself, Jack cooked some beef broth, for which courtesy Gus was gracious enough to thank him, and put into it a liberal supply of crackers out of his own kit.

As Gus claimed himself still in no shape for baseball, the boys left him to look after camp, and departed for the game of the afternoon. It is quite needless to state that all were down in the mouth at the prospect of playing the Elizabeth team with but eight men, yet it was a condition that apparently could not be alleviated in any manner, and all there was to do was to meet the situation philosophically and do the best they could with the resources at hand.

When they reached the main street of the town

the found the Elizabeth team, with a local band, awaiting them. Ears, who had taken lunch at a restaurant, was also in the gathering. The Boy Hikers were welcomed with a blare of horns and cheers, following which all took waiting automobiles out to the baseball park, which lay at the other end of the little city. All along the way they passed scores of pedestrians going to see the forthcoming contest.

At the grounds, our boys hurried into their baseball uniforms, and then went out upon the field for practice. It seemed good to be facing a game again, after more than two weeks' rest, even if they were to be short-handed.

While his team-mates worked thrown and batted balls across the diamond and out into the field, Jack and Grease, on the side-lines near the grandstand, put in their time practicing their battery positions. During the course of this the former was troubled to note that his pitching wrist did not have the strength and snap to it that it should, but pained him a little every time he cast a swift ball for Grease's big mitt, especially his favorite out-drop.

Jack deemed it best not to mention this matter to his comrades, for fear it would further dishearten them and result in consequent poorer playing. So when the game was called he went to the slab with the disquieting knowledge of his

deficiency, which he attributed to a slight sprain received in his fight with Gus, locked tight in his own mind.

A good-sized crowd witnessed the contest. The reputation of the visitors had preceded them, and as Elizabeth's men had been playing unusually good ball all season, an interesting game was predicted by the fans, although when it was seen that only eight Hikers would be in the line-up few of the townspeople seemed to have any doubt about the final result.

But in spite of their great handicap the boys in khaki put up a brilliant battle. One-Wing and Clare managed to cover the hole in left-field with splendid success, and although Jack's wrist hurt him at nearly every throw of the ball, he gamely made no complaint, putting them over with better accuracy than he had thought possible. Yet he knew that he was not doing his customary pitching. He knew that he could not attain the speed he needed to make his curves thoroughly puzzling, and was not surprised when the heaviest batsmen on the opposing side found his delivery for several disastrous drives.

Under these conditions, with a team of older and heavier men opposing them, there could be but one result in the long run. That was, the Elizabeth aggregation pulled ahead in the seventh inning too far to be headed off, and the

game ended in the ninth with a score of 8 to 5.

Of course our boys were disappointed, but they took their defeat in good part. Even if they could not be victors on the score-board, they made up their minds they could triumph over manifested ill-feeling. So, as they left the field they cheerily offered both their hands and congratulations to the opposing players, and gave them a hearty yell.

Their share in the receipts from the game proved to be close to three hundred dollars—a greater sum than they had yet attained since they left home, owing to the larger attendance. Ears took charge of this sum, and it was banked on their way through town to camp.

As they approached the site, by a short-cut across some pasture-land that edged the woods, they could see that Gus was evidently entertaining a visitor. For the substitute and a strange man sat on the bank of the creek just below the camp. Across the knee of Gus was a sapling he had cut as a fishpole, but the tip of this dangled, neglected, in the water, and he seemed to be giving his entire attention to explaining something or other to his companion.

As the boys drew a little closer, Gus looked up and seemed to have discovered them for the first time. The next moment the stranger gazed their way, then arose to his feet and walked out of view into the woods.

"Hello, guys," greeted Gus, as they got closer. "Been fishing a little to kill time while you were away, but they ain't biting much. Only got three fair-sized rock-bass. Well, what luck at the game?"

"We lost," responded Jack. "Eight for them and five for us."

"Hard luck, guys; but you couldn't expect to beat with only part of a team. It's cussed bad I couldn't have been there."

"We'll hope you'll git in the next, with Plainfield," said One-Wing. "Who was that chap you were jest with, Gus?"

"Oh—" Gus seemed confused for the fraction of an instant. "Oh, I get you now," he added, with a short laugh. "That's so, I was talking to a guy a bit ago. Why, he's a guy that just happened along. He wanted to know how to hit the nearest road to town."

Gus followed the boys up to the tents, and then they all returned to the creek for a refreshing swim in one of its deepest pools. During the course of this, when One-Wing and Jack were brought together, after a long dive, the former remarked:

"It's funny, Jack; I guess I'm seein' 'em ag'in. But somehow, as that feller Gus was talkin' to went off out o' sight his build an' walk put me a lot in mind o' Red."

"I guess you are 'seein' things' all right," laughed Jack. "Our bad luck at the game to-day has affected you, old scout."

One-Wing joined the laugh, almost believably. But he could not keep the troubled note entirely out of his mirth.

CHAPTER XIV

INCIDENTS OF THE ROAD

NEXT morning Jack discovered that in some inexplicable manner he had lost his cane match-safe. He distinctly remembered using it the evening before in starting his supper fire and made up his mind now that he must have laid it down and forgotten to pick it up again.

He looked in his pockets, and then searched the ground about his tent and the fire embers, but could find no trace of it. As there was no material about camp for fashioning another match-safe which would be water-proof, he determined to resort to a more simple expedient for protecting some matches, which Ben gave him, from a chance wetting. He had often used this method on shorter trips and found it to be an excellent one.

In his pack he had put, on leaving New York, a small square of paraffin for just such an emergency. Securing this, Jack cut off a chunk which he dropped in his tin cup, placing the latter upon the grate over his breakfast fire. Most of the boys gathered around to watch him.

Within a minute or two the paraffin had melted. Jack was ready with about a dozen matches. Bunching these together, heads all at one end, he dipped the heads into the hot wax almost half-way up the sticks. Then he withdrew the matches, and in a moment the paraffin had cooled, and they were in a solid mass with every sulphured tip fully safeguarded from any moisture that might come in contact with the unimportant short lower end.

One more bunch the young leader treated in the same way. Then he put away the remaining paraffin for future use, and dropped the coated matches in his coat pocket, first, however, showing his comrades, in answer to some expressions of doubt, how easily each match could be broken loose and ignited.

After breakfast the boys packed up and started on their way to Plainfield, their next stop, which they had been informed lay about nineteen miles to the southeastward.

There had been some misgivings on their parts that Gus might be still too sore and stiff to attempt the journey, but although his face necessarily still bore visible reminders of his encounter in the shape of patches of court-plaster, as in fact did Jack's, most of the swelling in his jaw had receded and he claimed to feel perfectly able to go on.

While Jack himself was in good shape for hiking, his arms and body, nevertheless, were yet quite sore from the numerous digs of Gus's long finger-nails, and he was very careful not to touch these lacerations, which he had treated with healing applications of witch-hazel and carbolated vaseline from his first-aid kit. The city fellow had used similar lotions very copiously from Joe's kit.

As the lads wended their way along the road in the bright clear air of the early morning they whistled and sang snatches of school songs, quite as merrily as the wild birds they met. To have heard their jests and laughter no one would have imagined that they had been defeated the preceding day in a ball game that they had counted much on winning. And, after all, how much more sensible this was! How foolish it would have been for them to let a little disappointment of the past hour spoil the rare pleasures offered by the present hour! Let silly older people do this, if they will; but it is not the way of the jolly, happy-go-lucky boy!

The country grew more rolling as the Hikers advanced. Instead of a great stretch of tableland as far as the eye could see, their vision was now limited to the much shorter vistas between themselves and some grassy or wooded rise, or perchance a ridge topped with the warm color-

ing of growing crops which were in a maturing stage. And when they were not traversing bottomlands, they were either ascending a hill or descending one.

This manner of frequent change of view kept them always on edge for interesting sights that were new, and although along about midmorning the sun beat down upon them uncomfortably warm, no one noticed it, except Grease, who seldom failed to observe such matters. In spite of the interest of the scenery he found time to mop his broad brow.

All at once one of the party noticed something peculiar about one of Tim's legs. The Irish boy had been at the tail end most of the time thus far, which probably accounts for the fact not being discovered sooner.

"Just look at Tim, will you, fellows!" laughed Ben, the discoverer, as he pointed at the strange-looking leg. "He looks for all the world like one of Coxey's Army! I say, Tim, old boy, where's your legging gone?"

To Tim's dismay he discovered that he wore but one legging. "Jerkins! I've left it back at our last camp," he exclaimed. "I remember now that I took it off, just before we left, to fix my sock."

"Well, it's too far back to return," said Jack decisively.

"But what'll I do? I look like a regular fright this way?"

"I'll tell you," announced Ears. "Peel off the legging you've got on, Tim. That will even up matters. You won't need it along the road, anyhow. When we come to some fair-sized birches I'll get some material to make you a new pair."

Tim and several others wished to know how this was to be done, but all Ears would say was, "You just wait and see."

All the party kept on the lookout, as they passed close to woods, for a birch tree to suit Ears. A cluster of rather small ones was seen in one place, but Ears shook his head. Finally Tiny pointed to a birch about eight inches in diameter which was growing with others on the edge of some timber-land a little way off the road.

Ears nodded, and leaping the fence, soon brought back two cylindrical sections of the pretty white bark which he had carefully cut and peeled from the trunk of the tree. These were about a foot long. In scribing with his knife, he had been very careful not to cut through the inner bark of the tree, as in that event it would have been permanently injured.

"Carry these along," said he to Tim. "When we stop for eats at noon, I'll put the finishing touches on them over a fire."

They continued onward.

Not long afterward a large orchard was passed. This ran for some little way along the roadside, and when a vigorous old tree whose branches were almost groaning under their heavy weight of luscious red-cheeked astrachans, was seen right next to the fence, the mouths of the boys fairly watered.

At once, with a "Come on, guys; here's eats!" Gus started for the fence. But Jack stopped him quickly with a call.

"That won't do, Gus," said the young leader. "I know we're all wild for a bite into some of those fellows, but let's ask permission first."

Gus sullenly retired. Inquiry at the owner's house, a little farther along brought the desired permission, following which the boys returned and filled their pockets with the fine-flavored fruit.

"I've always noticed that people are generally glad to give things this way when they have an abundance," observed Jack, as they went on, "but if a fellow takes without orders, it makes them mighty angry."

"Nobody can blame them, I suppose," said Gus sheepishly; "I know I'd be hot if a bunch of guys like us lit into my apples without so much as a 'by-your-leave, Mister.'"

"I could eat a billion apples like these!

Yum-o, yum-o, but they're good!" ejaculated Tiny, with his teeth sinking into a fresh one.

"Say, child," interposed Clare, "you haven't the slightest conception of what a billion means. Do not hereafter chatter and pratter about such a weighty and preponderous thing! Why, son, according to the best figures of the best statisticians, a billion silver dollars piled flat one upon the other would make a pile two hundred and forty-eight miles high! That many apples would reach from New York to San Francisco, laid side by side!"

"Where did you get all those ideas, father?" asked Tiny.

"Facts—clear, out-and-out facts," declared Clare earnestly. "If you don't believe it, figure it out for yourself, as I have done. It's easy. Here's another comparison for you: Maybe you've dreamed pictures of yourself counting your wealth when you get to be a billionaire. I used to, but I quit it. Why? Because, sonny, I've found out that if I had that much money before me in silver dollars, and could count it as fast as my watch ticks, it would take me, working day and night, six years and four months to complete my little job!"

"I'm satisfied to stay poor," laughed Jack.

"That isn't all," went on Clare. "Listen, children. If a railway train, going at the rate

of a mile a minute, had been started around the earth at the dawn of the Christian era, its object being to run one billion miles without stopping, it would have been necessary for that train to circle the earth forty thousand times, and it would not have come to the end of its journey until nearly New Year's eve, in the year 1628—sixteen centuries after Christ was born. During its frantic flight it would have seen the Savior live and die; Rome rise, flourish and decay; Britain discovered and vanquished by the Roman legions, and London and Paris established. It would have proceeded on its journey throughout the Dark Ages. It would have witnessed the birth of Columbus, the discovery of America—and have a couple of hundred years yet to continue! Now have you all grasped—”

“Enough!” yelled several Hikers in unison. “We’ve sure got it.”

But Clare didn’t seem to think so. “Supposing,” he continued, “that you are the mark, and an enemy a paltry billion miles away shoots a rifle bullet at you. I dare say you would dodge at the crack of his gun if you could, if you knew the bullet could carry that far, as we will suppose it will. Utter foolishness, children! Why, even if that bullet traveled at the ordinary speed of its kind, which is about a half-mile per second, you and all your descendants

would have plenty of time to pack up your household goods and take the slowest jitney to the other side of the world! For that bullet would not arrive for a matter of eight hundred years!"

While the boys were inclined to poke considerable fun at Clare on account of the astounding statements he had made, they really felt that there might be a lot of truth in them just the same. Had they taken the time to have proved his assertions by the use of pencil and paper, they would have discovered, indeed, that they were all actual truths, without distortion or embellishment. Clare was one of those studious, investigating boys we run up against sometimes in the course of our lives—boys who delight in poking into every curious thing they meet, and who literally tear it to shreds before they get through with their examinations.

By reason of the apples they had eaten, the Hikers had a pretty slim appetite at the noon hour. But they determined to have a short rest and a sandwich or two, at least, and went into a little gully by the roadside for this purpose.

Here Ears built a fire, while the others lay around and watched him, and proceeded to finish the queer leggings. He placed the bark sections around Tim's legs, lapping them over

to a snug fit, and marked them for trimming, allowing about five inches for subsequent lap. On the smooth trunk of a beech he then cut away the undesirable birch edges and ends, and soaked the bark in a stream nearby. After this, the pieces were laid close to the fire, while the boys ate, where the heat soon curled them nicely. When Tim tried them on, he found to his delight that they snapped over his legs with a spring that made them fit well and would call for no other form of fastening.

It was almost dusk when the boys came to the outskirts of Plainfield. They found, in a ravine, a fairly good camping-site, and were not long in getting up their tents and starting fires with which to cook some warm food for their hungry stomachs.

CHAPTER XV

THE LIGHT IN THE SKY

"WANT a job on my place so ya kin help yer country, do ya? Well, now, I reckon I'm jest the man't kin give it to ya! Got two likely boys o' my own, only a mite older'n you, over the big pond with Pershing. Since they went seems like me an' the ol' woman can't begin to keep up. Work jest piles up higher an' higher, an' nary a soul kin you hire. You bet, boys, I kin use the hull bunch o' ya out here in the fields, an' a heap o' thanks to ya fer yer kind offer!"

This was the speech that greeted the Boy Hikers the next morning when they got away from camp to seek farm work. Down the road a little way from the ravine in which they had set up their pup-tents, stood an old-fashioned square white house and a large red barn. An extensive acreage of oats, wheat and corn surrounded the buildings, promising much future work for the owner. As the boys had approached they had noticed that a considerable portion of the wheat had been cut, and that many stacks of golden sheaves studded the field. It

was here that they found the farmer and his wife. The latter was attired in overalls, and drove a reaper and binder while her husband stacked up the sheaves behind as she advanced.

Jack, who had handled a reaper before, succeeded in inducing the tired woman to return to neglected lighter household duties, while Tiny and One-Wing set up after him. Mr. Wall, the owner, then returned to the barn with the other boys. There he hitched up another team of horses to a big racked wagon having low, broad-tired wheels, and they all piled in and started back to the wheat field.

The reins were turned over to Gus, who plead very hard for the office of driver, while Ben and Grease took positions in the rear of the vehicle to store away the sun-cured sheaves that Tim and Clare should hand them from the ground. Mr. Wall himself assisted in a supervising way.

Gus proved to be rather a poor driver, several times cramping the wagon into undesirable positions from which the farmer had to extricate him, and once or twice, when they were working along the edge of the stubble, allowing his team to get into standing grain and tramp it down. Upon one of these latter occasions Mr. Wall was so provoked that he insisted Gus should exchange jobs with Grease, which the

city man did with decidedly ill grace and a lot of grumbling.

In his new place beside Ben he seemed to be of little more use than in his former one. Although very fat, Grease could apparently work all around Gus, who was slow and awkward, much to poor Ben's disgust. Before long the latter came to the conclusion that Gus was lazy and not any too anxious to work. In this supposition Ben was really pretty close to the truth, as we know.

After dinner, though tired, all the boys were eager for the game of the afternoon with Plainfield, and betook themselves into town a little after one o'clock. There they met Ears, who had made every arrangement with the local manager, a young clerk in a dry-goods store, and then everybody proceeded on to the ball-grounds.

The Plainfield men had not yet put in an appearance, but in the course of half an hour after the arrival of our boys, they turned up, proving to be as husky a looking lot as the Hikers had yet run up against.

While his wrist seemed slightly better than at the preceding contest with Elizabeth, Jack was not satisfied with it by any means, when he began to limber up back of the bases with Grease. He noticed that, with certain posi-

tions, which it was absolutely necessary for him to assume in order to use some of his most effective balls, the tendons still pained him, and he was worried not a little as a consequence.

How he wished that Joe had not deserted them! With the only change-pitcher on the team gone, there was no chance for relief in an emergency of the present kind. All there was for it was to go in and do the best he could, as he had done against Elizabeth, and let what came do so. But, he decided, he must not let his companions know of his handicap. That would only make bad matters worse. Their best playing, strongest hopes, were particularly needed under these conditions.

Then, thought Jack with more cheer, the situation was not so bad as at Elizabeth. There the Hikers had played with but eight men—a great disadvantage to any team—and now Gus was ready to take his place. Surely, if Gus played as strongly as he had in the try-out they had given him in New York, the present contest ought to go to the Boy Hikers, unless Plainfield was much stronger than Elizabeth had proved!

So even Jack himself, when three o'clock came, and with it a big crowd and the call of the game, went out into the field with his men, feeling in pretty good fettle.

To his delight his weak wrist did not bother him as much as he had thought it would, when he got down to actual work. Although Plainfield sent up some of her best stickers, Jack struck out the first three men to face him, and the side was retired.

The Hikers' hopes soared high, a few minutes later, when Ears, who was first up for his side, corked out a nice single over second, and big Tiny, following, brought him racing in with a two-bagger well out beyond center and right. Gus disappointed them by going out on a foul to catcher; but Ben, the youngest Hiker, made up for it by a surprise hit over the Plainfield short-stop's head, which scored Tiny. Tim and Clare were unlucky enough to be struck out, following this, and the visitors took the field again with two runs to their credit.

This was a fine start. Every Hiker was full of hope and spirit. If things kept up this way, they told themselves, the opposing side would have to more than hump themselves to defeat them. And when Jack struck out two more men in that half, and Clare in right gobbled in a long fly, after a good run, there was no cause for a fall of their high mood.

By this time Plainfield tightened down. Only one Hiker succeeded in reaching first-base, and that on a scratch hit to third which

was poorly handled, registering the first error against the local team.

The following two innings were a blank for both sides. In the first of the fourth, the Plainfield catcher, a big, burly fellow of eighteen or nineteen, succeeded in meeting one of Jack's swift in-shoots for a long drive out in Gus's territory. At the time a Plainfield runner was on first. By dint of hard sprinting this man had almost reached third before Gus had stopped the bounding ball. Then, to the dismay of his comrades, instead of throwing it to Grease at the plate, as he should have done in order to head off a chance try for home by the runner, Gus shot the ball to Ears at third.

Gus made a good throw of it, and Ears got the ball at the sack. But in the meantime, the Plainfield man had noted his opportunity, and kept right on for the plate, gaining this easily enough before Ears could relay the long throw of Gus's in to Grease.

Of course this first play of the substitute's being such a gross error, some of the Boy Hikers were considerably put out by it, but believing it due to excitement and new surroundings, they were kind enough not to throw it up to the culprit as they might have done with one of their older men.

Plainfield tried hard to tie the score before

they were retired in this inning, but it was to no avail.

Up to the eighth inning, so well did both sides play, no further tallies were registered. However in their half, Plainfield managed to bring in another run, tying the score at last.

In the first of the ninth, when they came in to bat again, Jack succeeded in striking out the first man to face him. The batsman to follow reached first on a short drive which Ben could not touch at second, but which Tim stopped in time to hold him. The next man up went out on a pop-fly to Jack. The burly catcher then stepped to the plate.

Evidently this was the town's favorite heavy-hitter, for from the grandstand and bleachers came a perfect bedlam of catcalls and gibes calculated to rattle Jack, blended in with admonitions to the batsman to "knock the cover off her, Tom!"

"Tom" struck wildly and savagely at Jack's second pitched ball—and missed! But the next time he was more fortunate. There was a resounding *crack*, as though the bat had split. Away over Tim's head the ball sailed, straight out in deep left-field, where Gus apparently would not have to move three steps to take it in.

Now was Gus's opportunity, his golden op-

portunity, to retrieve himself. Would he make good? His team-mates turned and watched him with wildly-beating hearts and high hopes. A moment later their hearts sank like lead plummets. Grease groaned aloud, threw down his mitt and kicked it savagely. Gus had muffed the fly!

But as quickly as he had discarded his mitt the fat boy now sprang and got it, gave a jerk to his mask, and, with one foot on the home-plate prepared for his own duty. For Tom, the big Plainfield batsman, was racing down the bases as fast as he could; and his fellow player, who had been at first, was now passing the bag at third, evidently intending to stretch the drive into at least a run for himself.

Several of the Boy Hikers yelled to Gus to throw it home, when they saw he had recovered the dropped ball. This time he did so. But somehow his long cast was poorly placed, going so far to one side of the plate that Grease failed to get his man; and Tom rested on third, as well.

It was truly disheartening to our boys, especially when the next Plainfield man to step up secured a clean one-base hit, scoring another tally for his side. The next man struck out.

With the score 4 to 2 against them, and their last bat, matters looked pretty gloomy, as the



"KIDS, THERE'S SOMETHIN' KINDER QUEER ABOUT THIS." — Page 167.

Hikers came in. But they maintained an outward good cheer, and strove their hardest to even up or break ahead. It was an utter impossibility. No more runs were forthcoming, and the game was over. Once more they were losers.

On the way back to camp, most of the boys felt pretty bitter toward the substitute; but at the first indication of an open outbreak, Jack had stopped the resentment. He could not blame his friends for not liking Gus, especially since the fight, when he had showed himself so unfair and mean, but Jack did not think it right for them to nag him about his errors in the game which, though costly to them, might have been entirely unavoidable. Yet the young leader thought it best to let Gus know that he must not continue such poor work as he had just exhibited, and therefore candidly told him this as they went along.

Gus laid his mis-plays entirely at the door of his stiff muscles, occasioned by his recent encounter with Jack, but promised a better showing at the next stop. Under the circumstances, recalling his own weak wrist, Jack began to blame himself, for mentioning the matter at all to Gus.

After supper that night the boys built a big fire in the center of the little area facing their

tents, and for a while lounged around this talking of past and forthcoming events. Then they began telling stories and cracking jokes, the while, with leafy branches, they switched away various delegations of those nefarious pests of outdoor life in summer—mosquitoes.

Knowing the dislike of the insects for kerosene, Grease had smeared some of this fluid over his face and hands and fore-arms till now he smelled like an oil-burner in a restaurant, and lay somewhat apart from the others who would not go near him.

"Never mind, honeys," said the fat boy, flat on his broad back, and gazing blissfully at the stars above. "It's better to smell like an old-fashioned lamp than to be switching 'skeeters all the time like you're doing! Notice the calm repose of *my* hands here, and then observe the motion of *yours*. Better get out your tinder-bottles and do the same as I!"

But the others preferred to switch. Although they too had small bottles of kerosene in their packs, with which to start refractory fires when the weather was damp and dry wood unavailable, they decided to let them stay there.

"Say, fellows," observed Tim, "did it strike any of you to-day when we worked on the Wall place over yonder that we were really doing Government factory work in war-time?"

"We're too dense; explain yourself," said Ears.

"I might figger it out, but I ain't got time; I'm too busy watching a 'skeeter that's tryin' to light on my nose," put in One-Wing. "How have we been doin' war factory work?"

"Because every cultivated farm is a munition *plant* in these times," grinned Tim.

There ensued a brief, heavy silence. Jack was the first to break it.

"That must be true, Tim. I'll vouch for seeing a good deal of planted stuff on that farm which will finally go toward helping swell the munitions of war. But you didn't see something on that farm I did, I'll bet a cookey. You noticed the little girl, about ten, there, I suppose. Her grandmother, Mrs. Wall, sent her out in the garden to get a pan of something for our dinner. She said to her mother when she returned, 'I just hate this job.' 'Tut, tut, child,' said Mrs. Wall. 'Just sit down and shell your enemy.' "

"Who were the enemy?" asked Clare.

"That panful of peas!" said Jack.

Not long after this, the boys retired to their pup-tents and to sleep.

How long he slept, Ears never exactly knew; but sometime during the still hours of the night, he was aroused by he knew not what. For a

while he lay still, wondering why he could not go to sleep again. Frustrated still, he got up and crawled outside in the soft night air, thinking to get a drink.

Out in the open, almost the first thing his eyes saw was a glaring light in the dark blue heavens off to the southward. Suspicious of its meaning, Ears ran to the edge of the trees, where a better view was afforded.

One look was enough. Faster even than he had gone out, the boy jumped over the ground on his way back to the tents, yelling:

"Fellows! Fellows! Wall's barn is afire! Wall's barn is afire!"

CHAPTER XVI

FIGHTING FLAMES

NEEDLESS to say, the wild alarm of Ears brought every Boy Hiker out of his tent in a hurry. They came rolling and tumbling to their feet, some rubbing their heavy eyes stupidly, and others so fully alert that a person to have seen them would never have thought they had been asleep at all. There is something peculiarly startling and awakening in the awful cry of "Fire!"

"Where? Where is it?" cried Jack, who had not fully comprehended the words of Ears.

"Wall's barn!" repeated Ears. "The barn on the farm where we worked this morning! It's afire. Hurry! This way and you'll see it. Quick! Maybe we can put it out before the whole thing goes up!"

He was running to the opening in the trees, as he spoke, and his comrades, who pulled on trousers and shirts as they went, followed.

When they arrived in the open, every pair of eyes was thrown off toward the Wall farm.

It was as Ears had said. Something a little

less than a quarter of a mile from them, with long tongues of flame licking upward from its roof into the blackness of the night, was the big Wall barn into which not many hours before they had stored load after load of wheat sheaves! Filled almost to its capacity with valuable grain, hay, horses, and vehicles, what a severe loss to old man Wall and Uncle Sam if it should be consumed!

As clearly as full moon shows in the heavens, the big barn and even the house and surrounding fields stood out on their slight elevation, all bathed in the pale, livid, flickering glare of the hungry flames. Evidently the boys were the only ones to have yet discovered the danger, for the house showed no evidences of life.

"Come on, boys!" shouted Jack, bounding away shoeless and half-dressed just as he was. "We must try to save some of the things in that barn, and the house, even if we can't save the barn itself! See! The wind is blowing toward the house. Go as you never went before!"

"Hanged if I'm going without my shoes, guys," protested Gus, hanging back. "Let the old barn burn; we can't get there in time."

It is doubtful if any of the others heard him. For he was behind, and by this time every Hiker was leaping over the rough ground down the

ravine toward the road fully as fast as their young leader himself, and like him, most of them were without shoes.

But if they bruised and cut their bare feet on the sharp stones and uneven turf, no boy seemed to be aware of it then, or, if he was, the knowledge only made him jump the faster.

At the road Jack placed one hand on top of the old rail fence that obstructed their further progress and vaulted it like a greyhound. The others followed suit, except Grease. The fat boy knew better. Like a woodchuck, he was always looking for a hole when he came to a fence. Finding one, he squirmed through, and puffed up the road after his comrades. Clare afterwards averred he could hear his breath explosions all the way to the Wall premises!

Just before the boys reached the big double gate in front of the Wall property, they saw Mr. Wall himself and wife and little granddaughter come running excitedly out of the house. Then the woman and the little girl ran back inside again, re-appearing in a moment with two pails, which they proceeded to wildly fill at the well. While they were doing this, the farmer was trying his best to hoist a heavy ladder against the burning barn, but it seemed too unwieldy for him to handle.

Dashing into the lane and across the yard, with an encouraging shout, now came the Boy Hikers, Jack in the lead.

Jack seized one of the pails Mrs. Wall had filled, and Ears relieved the little girl of the other. Quickly Ears completed the filling of his pail, and together they dashed toward the barn, while One-Wing took it upon himself to lead the rest of the boys for the doors of the structure in an effort to effect the saving of the animals and other valuables within.

With the help of Jack and Ears, the farmer was able to raise the long ladder in a hurry. Then Jack insisted upon going up first, with his pail, while Ears followed. When they reached the edge of the roof, they found the heat from the conflagration terrific. More than that, they saw that, with the limited fire-fighting means at hand, there was no earthly hope of saving the barn from destruction. For by now almost the entire roof of the structure was a seething mass of flame.

Dropping his useless pail to the ground, Jack fell gasping back upon the topmost rungs of the ladder. So blinded was he for the moment that he could only clutch his frail support, seeing nothing. Then, the smoke clearing from his eyes, he scrambled down the ladder, preceded by Ears.

"It's no use, sir," he said to Mr. Wall; "your barn's a goner! The best we can do is to wet down the roof of the house, while the others carry all they can out of the barn before it collapses."

The farmer took this declaration with surprising coolness. Possibly he had already suspected such a condition.

"Ears and I will carry the ladder to the house," went on Jack, hurriedly. "We will get on the roof where we can stand easier in our bare feet than you. You pump the water in these pails, and the little girl can carry it to the foot of the ladder, and your wife pass it up to us. Keep it coming fast! Never mind the barn; our boys will save all they can in there!"

So saying, he and Ears hurried across the yard with the ladder, while Mr. Wall directed his wife and the little girl in their duties with the water pails. In a few minutes, the water was coming up to the two boys on the roof almost as fast as they could distribute it, two additional pails having been unearthed. The wisdom of Jack's scheme was soon manifest. They had been wetting down the roof only a few minutes when the advance of the fire in the dry barn had reached a stage to cause numerous flying burning particles of wood to be wafted by the strong wind directly upon the

house. By deluges of water upon these brands they seemed to be succeeding in putting them out before they could ignite the damp shingles. But it was fast work. Several times the boys seized the larger pieces of blazing drift, and risking bad burns, cast them far out upon the ground. Both lads were wringing wet with perspiration.

By this time four or five men from a couple of adjoining farms had arrived, and were doing all they could to assist in removing the wheat in the barn. The horses and vehicles had already been safely gotten out by One-Wing and his party of heroic workers.

In carrying out the last of the sheaves, the boys and men had to wade through stifling smoke and an intense heat. But the very last sheaf was rescued before they gave up. As everything except the hay in the loft had now been saved, they beat a retreat, to assist Jack and the others at the house. Even as they did so, there was a rending, crunching crash, and the entire roof of the barn, and one wall, went tumbling into the great pit of fire. None too soon had the fire-fighters gotten out!

But the boys who had been at the barn found their services were not needed by Jack and Ears. With the collapse of the barn roof, which had fed the bulk of the live embers to the house,

there was now little to do on the roof of the Wall abode for the two barefoot boys except to keep a careful lookout, which they continued to do until the barn was completely consumed.

When they had finally crawled down the ladder to the ground, both the farmer and his wife thanked them, as they already had done the rest of the party, with tears in their eyes.

"It was a lucky day fer me, boys, when you decided t' camp near my place," said the man feelingly. "I've lost a good barn an' seventeen ton o' timothy, but thanks to you all we ain't shelterless ourselves, if the horses be, an' all my wagons an' grain is saved, too. If ya ever want a friend call on old Jake Wall!"

"It wasn't much to do, sir," protested the young leader. "We would have done a whole lot more for you if we could. Have you any idea how the fire might have started? One of our boys happened to awake, and saw the flames from our camp over there. The roof was afire then. When we got here there was apparently no fire on the lower floor at all, so it must have originated in the loft."

"That's where it must have started, lad, accordin' to my own observation, but how fire ever got up there I can't see. The only way I kin account fer it is that some tramp slep' in the hay up there last night, set fire to it accident'ly

with his pipe, an' then dug out afore my wife an' me woke up."

"Might 'a' been sot a-purpose, Jake," suggested one of the neighboring farmers, chewing, and expectorating some dark fluid.

"By gum, that's right, Jakel!" supplemented another. "Ain't you been a-readin' lately about a lot o' 'spishus barn fires around the country, where crops was jest put in? The editors do say as how they think them fires may be sot by German simpertheticks."

"Mebbe some of 'em are, Hi," returned Mr. Wall. "Fact is, wouldn't doubt it a bit. But they ain't been none around here, an' you know as well as me that there ain't no German blood livin' in these parts that'd be likely to do a pesky job like this."

"It's too bad, sir, anyway," said Jack. "You have the sympathy of every one of us. If we were going to stay around here longer we'd gladly help you build a new barn."

Others of the boys expressed views of similar import. Then, seeing they could be of no further use, and being very sleepy and tired out, they took their leave.

As they were passing through the gate by the road, One-Wing's sharp eye detected something on the gate-post that caused him to step up and make a closer examination. In the clear moon-

light he saw a peculiar sign, made in chalk.

"What is it, One-Wing?" asked Jack, stepping curiously up with his comrades and also looking at the queer characters.

For a moment the former tramp did not reply, but continued to study the marks. Finally he raised his eyes, saying with a puzzled look: "Kids, there's somethin' kinder queer about this. Been a tramp this way, I should say, an' he has invited another one to take a snooze in the hay of that barn that jest burnt down!"

The boys were greatly interested at this incomprehensible intelligence.

"How do you make that out, One-Wing?" asked Clare.

"These marks," was the significant answer, as the one-armed young man pointed to them. "You know I've tramped it a lot, an' I know the secret language o' the royal order from A to Z. Tramps an' hoboës have hundreds of signs like this one, an' they often use 'em along the roads to tell the news to any others that may happen along afterwards. They allers use chalk to make 'em, an' usually a fence or post along country roads to make 'em on. This sign says that 'the hay is good fer a snooze in this barn' an' that 'one man an' two women are livin' in the house.' In the upper figger the upright line stands fer a barn; the wave ag'in' it

at the top, means a hayloft, and the other waved line jest above means a man sleepin' with his back fittin' comfortably to the curves in the hay. Simple, ain't it? A straight horizontal line, like that at the bottom, with little short up-rights touchin' or crossin' it means people. If the little lines jest touch at their ends, like these two, they stand fer that many women. When such lines cross the long one, men is meant."

"Then it would seem that a tramp did sleep here after all very recently, and left this sign to guide others to a good bed," remarked Jack.

"I should say that was it," nodded One-Wing. "But," he added decisively, "he didn't sleep here to-night an' cause this fire. A man that done this fire bizness wouldn't stop to put up signs invitin' his friends to try the same hotel! He'd git out o' the county as fast as his legs could carry him! If a tramp slep' here last night, it was a second feller that come along, read the sign, an' thought he'd take a chance at the hay too. Well, this sign is sorter interestin', but after all it don't tell us fer sure how poor Wall's barn caught afire."

"That's right," said Ears. "Say, have any of you chaps seen Gus lately?"

Everybody looked at everybody else. For the first time since they left camp they be-

thought themselves of the substitute. No one could be found who had seen Gus at the fire.

"There he comes now—just getting here," announced Tiny, pointing down the road. "I remember he said when we started off for the fire he wouldn't go without his shoes. He seems to have 'em on, but he's been a dickens of a long time doing it!"

"What in the world makes you so slow getting here, Gus?" asked Jack, as they came up with the city fellow.

"I told you I was goin' to put on my shoes first," snarled Gus, though rather meekly withal.

"I could go to New York and buy a pair, almost, in that time," protested Jack.

"Well, that ain't all. I was running to make up time, and my wrist-watch flew out of its strap, and I had to stop and look for it in the dark. Did old Wall's barn burn down?"

"Yes," said Jack rather shortly. Neither he nor his companions liked Gus's story, yet they could not gainsay it.

"Didn't I tell you it would? Now see how foolish it was for you all to chase your legs off running over there?"

"We're the ones to kick, Gus," reminded Ben, sourly.

"How—what does old Wall lay the fire to?" asked Gus, changing the subject.

"It's a mystery to everybody," said Jack, truthfully.

In the darkness none of the party saw the expression of relief that swept quickly over Gus's coarse features at this. All the way back to camp he was unusually gay and cheerful.

CHAPTER XVII

BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES

LATE the following day nine footsore but cheerful Boy Hikers came within sight of the town of Somerville. Behind them lay a dry and powdery road, twenty-two miles long, which they had plodded over after a belated start, through a disagreeable, sultry heat.

Hot and sticky with perspiration, every one of them fairly yelled with joy when they found a cool little glen, beside a fast-running stream of goodly size, just beyond the town. In the twinkling of an eye they had divested themselves of every garment, and plunged into the cool waters of a deep pool near a cluster of overhanging willows.

After the refreshing swim, all sought large stones along the water's edge, and on these, using copious quantities of soap, washed and scrubbed their freshly discarded underwear and socks until they were as clean as the conditions could warrant. The garments were then hung up to dry, a hearty supper was cooked and

devoured, following which some of the party went fishing up-stream, while others remained behind to mend rent clothing and look after other needful little day's-end tasks.

The next morning every boy was up with the sun itself. The night had been quite cool, with few mosquitoes to molest them, and a most restful sleep had been the result. After the customary dip and breakfast, packs were made ready and shouldered. While Ears struck westward into town to arrange for the afternoon game, the others sought the morning's farm work.

A little way down the road they encountered a moving cavalcade, consisting of puffing traction-engine, threshing separator, tank, and several wagons. In the latter, drawn by heavy work-horses, were men, women, boys and girls—probably a dozen in all—who were gayly laughing and chatting among themselves, as well as exchanging good-natured repartee with the blue-shirted threshing crew up ahead.

In the course of their travels the boys had met several of these outfits. They knew that the procession was bound for some farm close by, and that the merry people in the wagons behind were going to help this owner out, probably in exchange for a similar service recently done them by himself and family and others.

Here was perhaps a chance to work right before them. The boys knew that on threshing-day help was generally at a premium, particularly upon large farms.

So they stopped the engineer, when they came up with the cavalcade, and Jack asked:

"Can you use the free services of a bunch like us in the job you're going to this morning?"

"You bet we kin," was the sententious reply, as the oil-marked fellow brought his noisy steel steed to a halt. "We're bound for Abe Wigginholt's big farm over yonder on the first rise. His sheaves are all in the field an' there's a heap of work gettin' 'em in. We want to get through by noon if we kin, so's to go over an' thrash old man Creed's crop of wheat before night. I don't see how we kin do it, though, with the help we got. I guess there ain't no question about Abe Wigginholt not bein' glad to put you to work if you really want work. Know anything about bringin' in sheaves?"

The boys explained that they had been doing that very work the morning before near Plainfield.

"You'll be able to help us out fine, then," remarked the engineer. "Ain't you strangers in these parts? What you doin' with them kind o' suits?"

Again explanations were made. Undisguised

interest and admiration was manifest upon their faces at the finish.

"By gol, that must be a jolly lot o' fun, to go trampin' through the country like you chaps is a-doin'!" remarked the engineer, who seemed to be the owner of the threshing outfit. Wouldn't mind doin' it myself, would you, Hank?"

"Hank," one of his raw-boned assistants, nodded energetically. "I'd sure like to see these kids play Somerville this afternoon, Sid," he replied. "Can't we let old man Creed wait till Monday mornin', and go see the game in town this afternoon?"

"That's it," approved a young farmer; "better do it, Sid. Our family has all planned on it, and I understand Bart's family here is goin' to the game too. You know my cousin Sam, who lives in town, is in the Somerville team."

"By gol, I'll do it!" said the engineer, seizing his throttle once more. "Jump in the wagons behind, you Hikers! I guess you kin find standin' room, anyhow. We'll all take in that game after dinner, sure'n pop!"

But the boys preferred to walk. They kept beside the wagons of merry young farmers, adding their jollity to the scene, until the procession finally turned into the big barnyard of Abe Wigginholt's. The barn was an immense,

modern structure. It stood at the head of a long lane which ran down through the fields to a wood at the lower end of the property.

While old-fashioned, the house was well-kept and capacious, with an extensive porch running the full length of its front. Abe Wigginholt, with wife and two boys—one of whom was about eighteen and the other fifteen—welcomed the party gladly, and was especially pleased to accept the services of the Boy Hikers when he learned whom they were.

The women folk went into the house, to make preparations for the big noon-day meal which was to celebrate the end of the harvest, and the men folk, with the exception of the threshing crew, hied themselves with the teams into the great sea of wheat stubble where hundreds and hundreds of golden islands of sheaves rose up and awaited busy hands to garner.

Small indeed was the farm the boys had worked on the morning before compared to this one. Here the wheat field, levelled by big clashing reapers several days previous, stretched out into a miniature yellow prairie—a small farm itself of warm, intoxicating color and sweet smells. And the big cones, a-dazzle in the sunlight, all over the golden stretches—what hordes of hungry mouths they would feed throughout the barren months of winter! How

they would put strength into countless bodies here and abroad, and thereby contribute to the sinews of the determined war against a cruel, despotic enemy!

It is small wonder that such thoughts as these coursed through the minds of our patriotic boys at their first sight of the big acreage of wheat. Jack's memory even harked up, from the recesses of its academic store-house, these lines:

"On every side the golden stubble stretches,
Looped and laced with silvery spiders' webs;
From stalk to stalk the snapping insects leaping,
Add sparks of glittering fire to gold and silver haze."

With six teams in the field, pulling loaded wagons up to the big red thresher by the barn, there was plenty to do for one and all. Jack and Ears were each allowed to drive, while the remainder of the boys dove into the fragrant stacks of yellow sheaves and tossed them to others who stood in the wagons and stored them away.

It was very hot. The boys sweat, and wiped their steaming brows, as they worked, likewise the men in the huge straw hats. Then some of the girls in the house came out, attired in clean, pink and blue gingham and calico, carrying pitchers of deliciously cold buttermilk, just off

the ice, that the good housewife had been saving up from her churnings for this very occasion. With dipper and cup the girls passed from thirsty worker to thirsty worker. Oh, how good that buttermilk did taste!

From the field the girls visited the threshing crew and regaled them with their cool refreshment. The big fellows, flecked with chaff and dust, broke occasionally into song which blended in strangely with the noisy breathing of the wood-fed engine and the hollow *boo-oo-oo-oom!* *boo-woo-woo-oom-oom-yrr-yrr-woo-oom-yrr-yrr-yrr!* of the separator's revolving cylinder. As the fire-boy shoved more beech bolts into the hungry maw of the boiler, big serpentine columns of black smoke belched up into the still August air.

The tall gray-shirted fellow who fed the separator, tucked in sheaf after sheaf with the majestic ease and *sang froid* of an old hand at the business, making the field workers hustle to keep him replenished. Out of the other end of the machine, from its great spout, continuously poured a golden spray of saffron straw. This fell scatteringly, like a beautiful waterfall, upon a golden stack which slowly grew and grew to a proportion that finally necessitated a "stacker," with pitchfork in hand, to keep it within symmetrical bounds.

Thus the work continued until, about eleven o'clock, the last sheaf in the big field had been brought in and stored away in the masticating jaws of the red thresher, and the last two-bushel measure of yellow grains had been carried into the barn and dumped into the huge bins erected on the lower floor. The yield had shown a little better than thirty bushels to the acre, so from the twenty-acre patch over six hundred bushels of wheat had swelled the bulging bins.

Now sounded the shrill, penetrating blast of the engine's whistle. The job was done; the women could begin to fly about in the house and get onto the tables the last platters and viands. All the morning they had been cooking the most tempting of dishes.

When the men and boys, after washing up at the well and making a brief halt at the side door to "slick up a bit" with a comb and brush and mirror which hung outside for this very office, came upon the long porch, the tables were fairly groaning with good things.

A whole bushel of potatoes had been cooked up. There were vessels of delicious roast chicken, boiled ham and lamb stew, to say nothing of boiled green corn, sliced tomatoes and stewed string beans. A large boiler had been usurped as a coffee-urn, while a large milk-can

stood near as a supply for those who liked sweet milk fresh from the cow and ice. Fully a dozen, pies, embracing apple, pumpkin, custard and berry, with as many tempting-looking cakes, and a number of different kinds of sauce, promised a wide and satisfying selection for desert. A harvest-dinner is one never to be forgotten, and our boys certainly will always remember this one!

As they ate, they talked and laughed as if they had known each other for ever and ever. Coffee cups and milk glasses were filled and re-filled by the tireless waitresses; who, no matter what their hurry, never failed to have some little remark or pleasantry to throw into the general discussion as they came up to the tables and retired again.

Accepting literally their host's admonition to "Pitch in, boys; don't be bashful!" the threshers seemed to vie with one another to stow away the most victuals, much to the pleasure of the cooks and the added merriment of all. Potatoes were captured on the points of forks, cut in half, sopped in gravy, to disappear as quickly as a coin is slipped from the palm of a wizard in necromancy. Knives performed, in instances, the double duty of cutting meat and scooping up string beans. Nor, by some of these rough and hungry men, were fingers forgotten!

CHAPTER XVIII

A SPOOKY RESOLVE

"RECKON yer goin' to take the boys to see the ball game this afternoon in Somerville, ain't you, Abe?" queried the engineer of the threshers, as he shovelled into his mouth a liberal section of pumpkin pie.

"Why, yes, Sid, I been kinder figger'n' that way," responded mine host, spearing a couple of fresh potatoes. "Jim an' Zed they been beggin' perty hard to go ever sence the game was announced in the *Somerville Trumpet* a week back, ain't you, boys?"

"Well, *some*, I guess," said Jim, the older of the two Wigginholt boys, while the younger grinned his own affirmative. "'Tain't every day a team with the repertation of the Boy Hikers comes our way for a game, dad."

"And since we've got 'em right here in our house with us, and we've got acquainted with 'em, and they're such jolly fellows, I want to see the game worse'n ever, dad!" put in Zed. "May I have another helpin' to blackberry pie, ma?"

"Yes, indeed, son," answered Mrs. Wigginholt, a buxom, motherly woman, as she passed the article in question. "You don't need to stint your pie appetite any to-day, son, as we can satisfy everybody on that score, I guess. But while you're talking about the game, Zed, you just tell your pa not to forget to take mother along, too!"

"And me, mumzy!"

This last was from Ethel, the pretty sixteen-year-old sister of Zed and Jim, as she came up with more steaming hot coffee for some of the men. She was a merry girl, full of teasing fun, and few of the Hikers it was who had not been called upon to match a good-natured wit with her that morning in the fields, as she brought them buttermilk, and now as she had waited upon them at the table.

"By all means," interjected Jack, "let Ethel go. My sister Alice loves to see a good ball game, too. I wish she were here. The girls would be fine company for each other."

"They'll all go," decided Abe Wigginholt—"the hull pack an' passel of 'em—every blessed member of the fam'ly—mother, sons, daughter an' myself!"

"Oh, dad! You darling, nice old daddy!" cried Ethel, dropping a cup to hug him.

"We might issue you all passes, only we are

under an agreement with all the teams we meet that not a solitary pass shall be granted except to newspaper men," remarked Jack.

"Thanks, but I wouldn't allow you to do a thing like that, if you could," spoke up the farmer quickly. "We got plenty to pay our way, an' we want to do it, because by so doin' we're contributin' to your efforts to help the Red Cross."

"That's right, Abe; that's the way we all feel about it," supplemented several of the men present, while the others nodded.

"Well," said Jack, "we hope you'll see a contest worth while. We've been a little down in the mouth on account of losing both games we played since leaving New York. My pitching wrist went back on me in those games, and Gus here, who is quite new with us, was out of the first one on account of injuries. However, my wrist is all right to-day, as far as I can see."

"Why didn't you tell us about your wrist before, Jack?" demanded Tim. "I wondered why you didn't have your usual speed with Elizabeth and Plainfield."

"Yes, why didn't you tell us?" repeated One-Wing indignantly.

"I was afraid you fellows would play worse for it," was Jack's confession.

"What ailed it?"

"I guess I twisted it a little."

"When?"

"Why,—you'll remember that first night in camp at Elizabeth," said Jack, attempting to cover, for Gus's sake, the humiliation attendant upon that memorable episode.

"Oh!" came from the Hikers, except Gus.

"Then you fellers think you'll be in better shape for the game with Somerville to-day, do you," asked the engineer.

"I'm sure it will make some difference in our favor, having my wrist in good shape," averred Jack, as modestly as he could.

"Be you the pitcher for your crowd?" asked the host.

"Yes, sir; just now. We started out from home with two, but Joe, who changed off with me, left us in New York. That's how we came to pick up Gus here. But he doesn't pitch."

"No, but I can hold the left garden down as well as the best of them," boasted Gus, spooning some sauce. "You guys just keep your eye on me in left this afternoon and you'll see! I played in a little hard luck at the last game, but that's gone now."

The Hikers cast a swift, disagreeable look toward the city fellow, and maintained so ominous a silence that several of the farmers felt constrained to stare toward Gus questioningly,

which caused that worthy to squirm uneasily in his seat and cover his embarrassment by renewed activity over his dessert.

"Say, Jack," remarked Zed. "I read once not long ago that pitchers sent the balls over a whole lot faster than ordinary people throw a stone; is that right?"

"Oh, yes," said Jack. "Pitchers do so much throwing of a ball that they acquire a surprising speed in time, probably more than they imagine. By using a moving-picture camera in connection with a special clock, a man in the east has recently found out that the average pitcher will throw a ball from his position to his catcher, a distance of a trifle over sixty feet, in three hundred fifty-one thousandths of a second, or at the rate of about two and one-half miles a minute."

"Well, by gol, that's surprisin'!" ejaculated the engineer. "I've often wondered how a ball could go from pitcher to ketcher, an' ketcher clean acrosst to second-base, an' beat a runner a-streakin' it from first to second, like they do."

"A thrown ball has amazing speed," reiterated Jack. "This same investigator, Mr. Gilbert, of Providence, Rhode Island, put three players of the New York league team in a test—White in the box, Mullaney at the plate, and Snodgrass at second, which were their regular

positions. It was found that it required only four and one-half seconds to pitch the ball (including the 'wind-up') to the catcher and have him get it into the glove of the man at second for a put-out. When you stop to think that the runner has a little less than ninety feet to cover, and that the fastest time made by professional sprinters is nine and two-fifth seconds for a hundred yards, you will see that the ordinary base-runner has to get a big lead and do some lively going in order to make the base safely."

"Well, I should say so!" rejoined several, while Jim added: "I never thought there was so much to baseball before."

"You boys ain't run up ag'in any barn fires in your travels, I 'low?" questioned Sid, the engineer, addressing One-Wing, who sat next to him. "We country folks have been readin' quite a bit about some spishus blazes of that kind round the country, but none in these parts yet."

"Yes, we have been readin' about them fires, too," answered One-Wing. "More'n that, you've had a barn fire not far from here jest lately, though I can't say as there was anything suspicious about it."

For a moment there was a universal suspension to the eating, except from the Boy Hikers.

"Fire near here? You don't say! Where, I want to know?" added Abe Wigginholt.

"Do you know Jake Wall, near Plainfield?" asked One-Wing.

"Know Jake like I know my own brother, a'most," declared the host. "You don't mean to say his big barn has burnt?"

"Burned to the ground night before last," put in Ben.

"Well, I swan! Hear that, wife!—poor Jake's barn gone. Did he save anything?"

"All but his hay; our camp was near his place, and we ran over and helped him get his grain and horses and wagons out," said Clare.

"How lucky for him you were near!" exclaimed Mrs. Wigginholt.

"My! you boys were brave," added Ethel, with sparkling eyes, while the subjects of her remarks felt very foolish. "I know Mary, Mr. Wall's little grand-daughter. Was she frightened?"

"Nothing to speak of," answered Jack admiringly. "She carried water from the well like a regular fireman, once she saw it was needed. Her grandmother helped us fine, too."

"What does Jake Wall lay it to?" asked the host.

"He thinks a tramp might have slept in his mow and accidentally set fire to it with his pipe," responded Tiny.

"Well, I dunno," differed Abe Wigginholt,

shaking his grizzled head; "I dunno about that! To my idee tramps is most likely to sleep outdoor sech nice nights as we're havin' now. I tell you, boys, I wouldn't be much surprised if it turned out that some pro-German ellerment had begun to work a match around these parts. There's one thing sure: I'm a peaceable man, but if the cusses burn my barn out yonder, I'll—I'll—well, I'll make the cold chills run down their ornery backs if ever I kin find 'em!"

As he said this, the stalwart farmer glared about the room as if inviting the first onslaught. He noticed Gus start and turn pale, at which he guffawed loudly and heartily.

"I swan! if I ain't a-skeerin' some o' you fellers," he said, still shaking with amusement. "Well, let's change the subjek. Where did you Hikers chaps put up last night?"

"We found a very nice camping-place down the road here a bit, to the northeast, in a ravine," answered Jack.

"Where the creek bends in? A pocket, jest at the edge of the woods?"

"Yes, sir."

The boys who happened to be looking up just then noticed Abe Wigginholt exchange peculiar looks with his family and neighbors.

"I 'low you wouldn't 'a' camped there if you 'a' knowed the facks about that spot," he stated significantly.

"Why, what's the matter with it?" questioned Jack. "We saw nothing out of the way with it, and intended to stay there to-night, as well as over Sunday."

"Well, I don't know as you'll come to any grief if you do," said their host slowly. "Personally I wouldn't mind puttin' up there myself. But, then, I don't believe in ghosts."

"Ghosts?" The word was echoed by practically all the Hikers.

"Yes, *ghosts*," repeated Mrs. Wigginholt with emphasis.

"Oh, goodness, I wouldn't sleep in that place again if I were you boys for a thousand dollars!" exclaimed Ethel, with eyes all but popping out of her head.

"Bad place!" commented several of the threshers, cheerlessly.

"Say, I wish some of you fellows would kindly relieve the tension, and explain matters," hinted Grease, as the cold sweat commenced to ooze out upon his ample brow.

"As I said, I dunno as *I'd* mind a puttin' up in Suicide Holler, but you might think better of it when you hear the story," went on Abe Wigginholt. "Back on 'tother side o' Van Wormer's big woods there, a long way from the main road, an' reached by an old lane growed up to weeds for six years back, stands an old

two-story frame house that everybody 'most around here thinks is ha'nted. Of course you ain't seen it yet, because it's too far back from the road. But it's there, an' empty. Nobody ever thinks o' rentin' or buyin' it, as lots o' young people about here kin be found that swears they've heard queer sounds an' seen queer sights around there by day as well as night."

"Jed Moore went in there one afternoon five years ago, when he was berryin', to seek shelter from a thundershower, an' he declares to goodness that an unseen hand knocked his hat off'n his head, an' a chokin' sound like somebody givin' their last dyin' gurgle sounded in his right ear, an' not a soul in sight," put in a neighbor woman.

"There's a lot o' sech tales, an' all from people of good repertashun, too," went on their host. "But I ain't told you the story yet. Ten years ago two maiden ladies—sisters by the name o' Harkness—came here from the east an' bought that place, sayin' they liked seclusion, as both had lost their husbands an' felt very sad-like. Outside o' that people about these parts didn't know much about the Harknesses. But one fam'ly, who went to call on 'em, heard an awful moanin' goin' on, an' they went away without goin' in. Another time a young chap on the next section east of us happened upon both

sisters a-settin' under the willows by the creek in the holler over there where you fellers camped last night. An' after that they was often seen there, always seemin' to be weepin'. Well, it wa'n't more'n two years after that when one mornin' in early October, Bill Henderson found both of the Harkness sisters stone dead on the settin' room floor of their old house, an' not a mark on 'em! But a little p'ison bottle layin' near told the story of how they'd shuffled off. Ever sense the place down there where you camped last night has been called Suicide Holler, an' it's been shunned about as much as the old Harkness house itself."

The Boy Hikers listened to this harrowing tale with varying degree of interest and emotion. When the farmer had finished, Gus, trembling and pale, exclaimed:

"No more sleeping in that place for me, guys!"

But the other Hikers, less superstitious, seemed to accept the situation as a sort of challenge to their courage, and stoutly averred that they would continue to camp in Suicide Hollow as long as they were in the neighborhood.

"And just for the fun of it, I'm going to sleep to-night in the Harkness house!" was Jack's astounding declaration. "I've always thought I should like to spend a night in a real haunted house!"

CHAPTER, XIX

ON EVEN TERMS

THE two defeats thus far sustained by the Boy Hikers on their trip home might have led them into looking for a lack of interest, on the part of the public, in the game scheduled with Somerville for that afternoon at three o'clock sharp.

If so, the boys were agreeably disappointed. For, as they marched toward town an hour or so after the events described in the last chapter, many farmer's rigs, loaded to their limits, passed them, all evidently bound for the game, which had been widely advertised by the enterprising local baseball management. Behind the little company of khaki-clad marchers, with engine throttled down to their pace, came the big Wigginholt touring-car containing the entire family. And behind the automobile were several buggies and phaetons bearing neighbors, among whom the threshing crew had been parceled out and stored away. All intended to make a merry half-holiday of it.

As in Elizabeth, the town band awaited the

coming of the Hikers, and with them was Ears who had fixed everything for the contest. The musicians greeted the Hikers uproariously. Jack was introduced by Ears to a good-looking young man whom the Hiker manager said was Duncan Davis, playing manager-captain of the Somervilles, following which all hands made their way out into the north end of the town to the ball-grounds.

When they arrived they found the Somerville team already in uniform, and out upon the diamond practicing. As early as was the hour, several hundred spectators occupied seats in the grandstand and bleachers. Scores more were coming through the pedestrian gate, while the ticket-taker at the vehicle gate also had his hands full of patronage.

Just a few minutes before the game was called, Jack pulled the substitute aside, and said: "Gus, I don't like to say anything, but the boys are pretty down in the mouth about the way you played at the last game. I'm afraid if you don't do better this time they'll insist on my keeping you out in the future. You'd better make up your mind to put in your best licks."

With the words, the young captain walked away, not giving Gus a chance to reply. The substitute glowered after the retreating, boyish

form in ultramarine blue flannel for a moment, and then turned off.

"I wonder if he suspects me," thought the fellow uneasily. "How I hate him!"

To insure the utmost fairness a double-umpiring system was agreed upon between both managers. Promptly at three the Boy Hikers took the field, having accepted this choice, and the umpires went to their positions.

The batting-order and line-up was as follows:

BOY HIKERS:	SOMERVILLE:
C. Wallace, RF.	R. Stone, P.
K. Stoddard, 3B.	H. Peterlin, 1B.
T. O'Toole, SS.	P. Cross, LF.
H. Schottenberger, C.	A. Newman, 2B.
B. Stoddard, 2B.	E. Murphy, C.
J. Westwood (Capt.), P.	J. North, SS.
G. Wettlaufer, LF.	C. Donnegan, CF.
"One-Wing," CF.	M. Sheltraw, 3B.
T. MacHugh, 1B.	D. Davis (Capt.), RF.

Jack had found out in practice with Grease that his wrist was apparently as good as ever, and the way he now began putting his curves over the plate to Stone the first Somerville man up, made that gentleman's eyes almost stick out. He had swished the air three times before he realized, scarcely, that he had struck out and that the umpire near him was ordering up Peterlin.

But Peterlin, the evident stick mainstay of the locals, did better. The truth is, he surprised the Hikers. He caught Jack's second ball a smashing blow, and it was seen that the spheroid was evidently going over the fence within the fair boundary flag near first! It did, and to the deafening applause of hands and feet and voice from grandstand and bleachers, to say nothing of the blare and boom of horns and drums from the band, Peterlin calmly trotted around the bases for a home run.

Too late Jack realized that he had given the husky Somerville first-baseman just the kind of a ball he wanted, and straightway made up his mind that Peterlin would not get another like it! With the next batsman he had better luck, striking him out; and Tim stopped a hot grounder which Newman sent him, throwing the latter out at first and retiring the side.

Stone, the opposing pitcher, was a big gaunt fellow almost as tall as Tiny. He looked to the boys as if he might be able to uncork considerable speed, as well as possess good control, and events proved their surmise entirely correct. The way he shot the ball across to Clare almost made the scientific boy dizzy. But he kept his head, as usual, and managed to lace out the third one for a pretty single over short's head. Ears followed with another, but this time by

quick work the Somerville infielders succeeded in effecting a double-play. Tim struck out, and the Hikers again took the field with the score standing 1 to 0 against them.

This time Jack heartened his team-mates by securing three consecutive strike-outs. They renewed their places on the players' bench, hoping for better results. But once more they were destined to disappointment. Although Grease led off with a nice two-bagger into Donnegan's territory at center, both Jack and Ben went out on infield hits that settled squarely into the hands of the clever Somerville men, at a time too when a good long drive would have meant a score.

But if the local team played snappy ball, so also did the visitors. During the next three innings the Hikers pulled off a number of brilliant plays, among them a triple put-out in which Tim, Ears and Tiny figured, bringing forth great applause from the spectators and the band. Gus, too, partially redeemed himself by making a two-base hit, but to the disappointment of all, was put out in attempting to steal third at a time when discretion should have warned him against such a venture.

However, they were unable to put a single tally over the plate themselves until they came in in the last of the sixth. In this inning Ben

knocked a three-bagger at the very outstart, and Jack fortunately followed it with the very single they needed, bringing Ben across. But Jack was forced to die on base, after stealing second, for the next three men were retired in order.

As they were starting back to the field, the youth who had been scoring upon the huge blackboard at the back of the field came up.

"Any of you fellows got any chalk?" he asked. "I'm out."

All shook their heads, except Gus. The city fellow said he had some chalk in his other clothes. He ran under the grandstand to the dressing-rooms, and reappeared in a few moments with a half-stick of the article in question.

"Here's a piece," he said, as he handed it to the scorer. "Don't forget to chalk up that run we got this inning."

Gus then joined One-Wing, who had lingered, and together they walked out to their positions in the field. Upon the face of the one-armed young man there was a peculiar, pondering look. Several times thereafter, during the innings that followed, his gaze wandered off in the direction of the substitute.

In their turn at bat Somerville began to stir things up in a manner calculated to discourage their opponents. Murphy was first up. He hit one just out of Tiny's long reach, making second.

North struck out, but Donnegan brought Murphy in by a clean hit over Ben's head at second. Davis advanced him to second by a sacrifice. Then Stone met one of Jack's in-shoots for a surprise hit between short and third, and before Gus could field the ball in to Grease, Donnegan had sprinted across the plate. Luckily for the Hikers, the long drive sent into center-field by Peterlin was captured, after a wonderful run, by One-Wing in his only hand. Cheer after cheer greeted this exploit of the one-armed Hiker, but nevertheless our boys came in pretty glum, with the score standing 3 to 1 against them.

This feeling was not bettered any in their turn, as they were soon sent back again without having added any more runs to their standing.

But in their next turn at bat—the latter half of the eighth inning—the Boy Hikers cheered up. As a result of a three-bagger made by the fat boy, a two-base hit by Ears, and a nice single by Tiny, runs were scored by both Tim and Grease, thus once more tying the score.

Neither team could put a man across the plate in the ninth inning, try as they did. This was the tightest, most exciting contest the spectators had ever witnessed on those grounds. So tense was the situation that only under the most stirring plays did the spellbound onlookers voice

their opinion, and then they would go nearly wild, and the coaches shout themselves hoarse.

The tenth opened up rather auspiciously for Somerville. North gained first on Tim's first error of the game—a fumbled grounder. Jack succeeded in fanning Donnegan, but both Sheltraw and Davis made hits, North scoring. Then, as if to add to the menace that faced the Hikers, Stone, by swift running, reached first on a scratch hit down the third-base line, the other runners advancing safely to second and third, filling all the bases.

With Peterlin now facing him at the plate—Peterlin, the heaviest slugger on the Somerville nine—Jack found himself with a big problem to handle. As if appreciating his unenviable situation, the band players tooted their horns tantalizingly, and the Somerville rooters made a racket as if Bedlam itself were turned loose.

It was enough to have rattled any pitcher but the coolest. By a great effort Jack compelled himself to be calm. He thought that by now he knew the burly batsman's weakness at the plate. Anyhow, he told himself, he would put him to the test.

So he gave Grease the secret signal for his biggest out-drop, and sent the ball whizzing across the diamond like a bullet. It looked to the Somerville slugger to be just where he

wanted it. Drawing back he lunged at the ball as if he fully expected to send it over the fence for the second time that day. But he fanned only the air. He had struck fully three inches over the elusive ball!

"Str-ri-ike!" shouted the umpire.

Almost before the astonished Peterlin could recover himself,—indeed, before he could make a swing,—Grease shot the ball back and Jack returned it with lightning-like speed. It was a straight one, right where the batsman liked to get them. But too late!

"Str-ri-ke tuh!" announced the official.

Again Grease sped the ball back to Jack. Again Jack's supple pitching arm swung around. But this time, instead of sending its missile toward the plate, the ball shot swiftly out to Ears at third, where from the tail of his alert eye the young pitcher had seen Sheltraw leading off toward home. *Thud!* The ball settled in Ears' glove. *Thump!* It came down upon Sheltraw's back two feet from the bag.

The umpire motioned the crestfallen Somerville player in, while his angry fellow-players berated him for his rashness.

Jack felt a relief with Sheltraw disposed of. So far so good! Now to buckle down again in his effort to make the third out!

As he looked at Peterlin, the big Somerville

first-sacker stared back his defiance. Jack could see his huge hands close tighter upon the ashen stick.

Now the Boy Hiker pitcher wound himself up as if for one of his most sizzling-hot curves. Then his arm came around with a terrific sweep, and Peterlin saw something dark coming toward him. It appeared fair over the base. Peterlin drew his bat far back and swung at the ball savagely.

But he fell short. The ball had not yet reached the plate. It was one of Jack's cleverest slow-balls,—his fade-away—a ball fairly halting and stumbling as it went floating on its course, as a result of the loose grip he had put upon it as it left his fingers.

"Str-riker hout!" shouted the umpire.

And Peterlin walked out into the field with the rest of the Somerville players, all but dazed.

A critical situation still stared the Boy Hikers in the face. With their opponents one run in the lead, and their bat before them, they must now either tie the score or better it in order to save themselves from defeat.

Ben stepped to the plate first. Poor chap, he tried to do his utmost to make a hit, but failure met his efforts; he was retired on strikes. He threw down his bat in disgust, and the hearts of his comrades sank with his own.

Jack managed, however, to revive them by getting first on balls. But once more their spirits dropped, as Gus went out on a foul to third—a mere little pop-up.

When One-Wing stepped up to the plate, and lifted his bat with only one hand, few of the thousands in those grounds, not excepting his own team-mates, ever expected to see a run materialize. As a matter of fact, the majority of the spectators, had risen to their feet, preparatory to going home with the triumph of the local team in their keeping, and the scorer was just in the act of putting a big cipher in the Hiker column on his board, when, with the first ball pitched him, One-Wing hit a terrific blow.

Somebody shouted, "It's a home run!" Others took up the excited cry, as it was seen to be correct. The ball fell out of view beyond the fence in right-field! Jack came galloping gayly in, with One-Wing prancing behind.

After all the Boy Hikers had won out!

This is the score by innings, just as Ears secured it for the Hikers' official records:

Innings	...	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	R	H	E
Somerville	..	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	4	6	3
Boy Hikers	.0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	2	5	8	2

CHAPTER XX

A NIGHT IN A HAUNTED HOUSE

"So you boys really mean to stick it out again to-night in Suicide Hollow, do you?" asked Jack.

The Hikers had just parted with the Wigginholt party, and had come out of the Somerville State Bank after having deposited four hundred and twenty-three dollars to their credit as a result of the big attendance at the game.

"That's our idea," responded Ears and One-Wing in unison. All the other youths added their support to the plan in one form of comment or another, except Gus. The substitute protested his unwillingness to pass another night in the spot where the Harkness sisters were reputed to have spent so much of their time in lamentations and weeping before their tragic death in the old homestead on the further side of the woods.

"You guys can hang out in that place if you want to, but none of it for your Uncle Dudley!" declared Gus.

"Why, where will you stay if we do?" inquired One-Wing.

"I'll take my tent and blanket up-stream and bunk in the first good dry place I find," was the reply.

"Well, none of the boys can object to that, I guess," stated Jack. "But, really, Gus, I don't see anything to be skittish about in remaining in Suicide Hollow, as they call it. I think it's great fun to brave out things of that kind, and live the silly stories down. That's what made me make up my mind to sleep in the old Harkness home to-night—just to prove to these superstitious people around here that there is nothing spooky about the place."

"Then you actually meant it when you told the Wiggenholts at dinner today that you would sleep in that haunted house?" demanded Ears, almost unbelievably. The others stared at Jack as if they, too, had thought he were jesting at the time.

Jack laughed outright.

"Why, sure I meant it!" he said coolly; "I'd just as lief sleep there a night as anywhere else. My mind is fully made up. Jim Wigginholt said I could easily find the place by keeping on down the road past our camp till I came to an old lane on the other side of the woods. About a quarter of a mile up that, he said, I'd come to the

house, in the midst of half a dozen old butternut trees. I'll leave you at the ravine, and go directly to the old house, as I want to find it while it is still daylight."

"You'd better have one of us fellows go along, Jack," proposed One-Wing. "I don't mind keepin' you company in the house fer the night."

"I would like that," was the response, "but you see, One-Wing, I'd like to satisfy myself that I'm not afraid to sleep there alone."

They saw there was no dissuading their young leader from his project, so they made no further objections, and all started up the road that would lead them to their former camping-site in Suicide Hollow. At the ravine Jack left them, continuing on alone, after promising to return to camp early the following morning.

He had no difficulty in picking out the lane, to which Jim Wiggenholt had directed him, after he had passed the big wood which lay just east of the camp. A quaking old gate marked its outlet into the main road. The boy crawled through an aperture between two of the rotting, sagging boards, and made his way across a lot covered largely with milkweed and thornbushes.

So overgrown was the old road with grasses and weeds, from long disuse, that he scarcely could make out the marks of wheels that sometime in the distant past probably had made fre-

quent use of it. It was now really more of a trail than a road. Only traces of the fences remained which had one day bordered it.

For a way a well-defined cow-path ran along the middle of the old road, but after awhile this spread off and vanished in the brush. Where it disappeared from view two or three cows and an aged-looking horse browsed upon a patch of none too succulent grass. Nearby lay the bleached bones of some animal, probably a sheep or dog.

The undergrowth became more rank and obtruding shortly after this. In many places it hung in ragged patches over the dim path, and Jack had to crowd it aside in order to force his way through. To add to his difficulties, the sun had already sunk, and an early darkness was fast absorbing the rapidly diminishing twilight.

Pushing his way along with renewed vigor he presently uttered an exclamation of relief. Before him was an opening of considerable size, not much different in character to the rough ground he had been traversing, except that there were less bushes and longer grasses, and a number of old butternuts with leaves already searing yellow. But the boy's eyes rested longest on a building that rose among the grasses and weeds near the edge of the woods—a building weather-worn and storm-beaten, with every ves-

tige of paint long since washed out; with leaning, half-open front door, and staring socketless windows.

Had the structure been placarded with immense letters Jack would not have felt a bit more assured than he was that he stood looking at the house which the whole countryside feared as if it were a pestilence—the neglected, deserted former home of the queer Harkness sisters who had died within its foreboding interior in one night, after years of mysterious melancholy, leaving a little poison bottle by their side!

At the north end of the time-scarred building the bole of an old dead oak rose up, white and stark, with bleached branches reaching out over the sagging, shingled roof like so many bony fingers. Even as he noticed it, two crows flew off its topmost pinacles, and winged their black bodies through the dusk toward the heart of the wood, with lonesome, dismal *caws*.

Jack shook himself, and fetched a laugh.

"This isn't a very attractive place at night-fall," he mused, as he strode determinedly toward the decrepit structure, "but I have started out on the adventure, and I must see it through!"

He went up the creaking steps and across the groaning porch; his hand sought the cracked doorknob of the partially-open door, and drew

it, grating and squeaking, a little farther aside so that he could enter.

Within, night had already come. He could only faintly make out the dim outlines of a wall straight ahead. Objects were so obscure that he decided to use his searchlight. To his dismay, he found that no light answered his pressure of the little black button. Quite certain that the batteries had become exhausted he now felt in his pocket for matches, but to his added discomfiture he found none, and recalled that he had used the last lucifer that morning in starting his breakfast fire.

Bitterly blaming himself for not having made sure that he had a usable illuminant before he left his comrades, but determined not to be thwarted in his plans, Jack commenced to grope his way across the apartment he was in. In one of the farther corners he thought to spread his blanket for his lonely night's sleep.

As he stepped forward a board suddenly receded under his weight, and he was all but precipitated upon his hands and knees. Catching himself by an effort, and avoiding the broken spot in the floor, he spread out his hands and went slowly on.

Suddenly there was a fluttering, whirring sound, like a heavy rustle of garments. Two or three dim, ghostly shapes streaked by his face,

and his big-brimmed hat went from his head as though brushed aside by invisible hands. Jack gasped. For a full minute he stood stock still, waiting. Then he compelled himself to laugh aloud, as he stooped and pawed about till he found his headgear.

"Bats of course!" he soliloquized.

He was about to take another step, when he distinctly heard two raps which seemed to proceed from a door he could dimly discern now at his right hand. Listening a few minutes, he again made out the striking sounds. They appeared for all the world like knockings from some unseen person in the room opposite.

Jack made up his mind to investigate. He moved slowly along till his outstretched hands touched the door. Then he paused and waited.

In a moment he saw the door swing slightly farther ajar, then move quickly back again with a thud. Reaching out with one foot, to insert it between portal and jamb the boy's toe touched a piece of board. He smiled. He had disclosed the identity of the invisible knocker. It was the draft through the open rooms which caused the door to swing upon the block!

Something prompted him now to continue on into the adjoining apartment. Perhaps it would be lighter in there, and he could therefore more readily arrange a place to bunk.

But this room faced the woods, and if anything was even blacker than the one he had just left. Still, he might as well feel his way around a little before retiring, he thought. With this idea he stepped carefully forward, hands outstretched as before. He had taken three or four paces when something white flashed in his face. Involuntarily Jack shrank back. The object, whatever it was, seemed to suspend itself immovably there before him in the black.

Gingerly he put forth a hand and touched it. Again he smiled and his fluttering heart calmed down. He was near a partition; the white thing had proved to be a section of torn wallpaper hanging from the damp plaster!

Once more Jack went on, feelingly, as before. A dismal moan came from somewhere in the upper regions above his head. Then something tore raspingly across the old shingles. The youth's heart jumped, although he was sure it was a branch of the old oak outside, moved by the wind, that had caused the sounds.

All at once he stood in his tracks as if petrified, the cold chills running down his spinal column. His hair seemed to stand straight up like bristles. For something like an icy finger had touched him fairly upon his left cheek!

"Uggh!" ejaculated Jack, jumping aside.

It was hard to keep his knees from knocking together, or to still his wildly beating pulse. But, when there came no repetition of the horrible touch, his oozing courage came back somewhat. Indeed, it all returned a moment later, as his groping hand came in contact with the unmistakable end of a dangling wire.

Once more Jack's fortifying laugh rang out hollowly in the empty structure. He now determined to make a final examination of his flashlight, before proceeding farther, a happy thought having come to him. He recalled that once before, several days previous, the lamp had refused to work. Then he had found the trouble to be a depressed contact spring in the head of the apparatus, which he had fixed in a moment by bending the spring up a trifle. He knew he could do this in the dark now if nothing else ailed the lamp.

So he unscrewed the head, got his finger under the spring and pulled up a little. Replacing the lens, and pressing the contact button, he was overjoyed to see a brilliant diverging belt of light stream across the uneven floor of the apartment in which he stood! He raised the beam, letting it play aloft. Sure enough! —the ghostly finger that had touched him was none less than a heavy wire hanging from a staple in the ragged ceiling above.

With the flashlight Jack now went boldly from room to room of the old building. All were moldy and bare, except for some small refuse here and there upon the floors. It was the same upstairs, after he had carefully ascended the creaking steps, the three bedrooms up there having long since been ridden of all furniture and every semblance of human occupancy.

Returning to the lower floor, the boy took off his pack and spread his blanket in the cleanest corner of what must have been formerly used as a sitting-room. For a long time, despite his utmost endeavors to force himself to sleep, he was unable to do so on account of the mournful, depressing creaks of the old floor and stairs, the disquieting rattle of dilapidated window sashes, the rasping groans of the old oak upon the roof, and the intermittent *chuck! chuck! chuck!* of the vagrant doors. In desperation, indeed, he finally arose and blocked the portals against further movement.

But it was only to find, upon again seeking his blanket, two fiery eyes fixed balefully upon him from the framework of the glassless side window of the room.

"Shoo! Shoo!" cried Jack, as with one hand he snatched up his blanket and waved it wildly, and with the other snapped the yellow beams

of his flashlight upon the unnerving spectacle. At once there was a retirement of the fiery eyes into the darkness without, and the rays of the boy's lamp plainly outlined the hind-quarters of an old white horse as it plunged affrightedly off into the bushes.

"Same old nag I saw with those cows on the way here," laughed Jack, not without some nervousness, for he was very human if he is one of the heroes of this story.

Once more he went back to the corner and rolled up in his blanket and tried to sleep. This time he was more successful. The queer sounds about him grew less and less distinct, farther and farther apart, until finally they merged into the great chasm of nothingness that spells deep slumber.

Jack never knew how long he slept. All he recalls is that some time during the night some heavy object came hurtling down upon him, and the next moment he found his arms bound to the floor with gripping, iron-like fingers, and the hot breath of a human being struck into his face.

Opening his startled eyes with a gasp of alarm, he saw standing before him, a flickering match lighting up his coarse, triumphant features, the form of Gus Wettlaufer!

And in the one who had so roughly pinioned

him down, he was sure he recognized, by the same light, the even more sinister face of the man One-Wing had said put him in mind of Red, the tramp!

CHAPTER XXI

THE BLIND SEES

AND now let us see how matters are faring with Joe Laporte.

Totally unsuspecting of the subterfuge the crafty Spiess had played upon him in getting him to desert his friends, the French lad proceeded to enjoy himself in the city of Boston as soon as he arrived there.

Under normal conditions Joe was quite a spender, but now, fairly dazzled by the hundred dollars in banknotes which he carried in his pocket, and beside himself with elation at the thought that he was now the signed leading pitcher of what was soon destined to be the most famous independent ball team in that part of the country, he felt quite like a millionaire, and at once engaged a large apartment in one of the principal hotels of the Hub City.

Apeing after the supposed reporter and baseball magnate who had engaged him, one of the first things Joe purchased was an expensive swagger-stick, with which he strutted along the

boulevards of Boston so pompously and importantly that it would have made his former team-mates, and Spiess himself, laugh immeasurably could any of them have seen him. For the first two or three days he visited a number of famous historical places, and attended plays at the most popular theaters in the evenings. But tiring of this, he passed the balance of the week largely in playing pool and billiards, and smoking cigarettes, in company with a bunch of fast young fellows a little older than himself—fellows who cared more for the money he spent upon them, and that which they won from him over the tables, than they did about Joe himself.

The following Friday afternoon he called Spiess up by long distance telephone, and was told by his employer that he might return the next morning. So Joe took an early train back to New York. He did not know then that that same morning the Boy Hikers were assisting a farmer near Somerville to thresh his grain, but such was the fact. However, the French boy did know enough about the plans of his old associates to believe that they had left the metropolis before this, and were probably somewhere along the route homeward. Just what their schedule was he was at a loss to understand, for this matter had not been determined

at the time of his unexpected leave-taking with them.

A number of times during his stay in Boston he had thought of his old comrades, despite his effort not to do so. Like all guilty minds, his strove to banish every allusion to those whom he knew in his heart he had wronged. More than once his conscience had pricked him for not sticking to the boys he knew were true to him. But each time he had impatiently cast the troublesome little voice of Right from him, angry with himself for having even momentarily entertained it.

When he arrived back in New York, he secured a lunch, and went directly to the office of William Spiess, at Room 817 in the Knox Building. He was determined to know at the earliest possible moment just how soon he would be able to start out upon the road to pitch the "Atlantic Independents" to victory.

He found the office girl gone to lunch, but Spiess himself was fortunately in, awaiting her return. The German greeted his caller with an affable smile and a demonstrative handshake, pushing him a chair near his desk in the private apartment.

"Glad to see you back, young man!" he exclaimed. "I hope you have enjoyed your ten days in Boston?"

"Couldn't have wanted a better time, I guess," said Joe, "but of course I've been kind of anxious to get to playing ball in that new team of ours."

"Quite so, quite so,—a perfectly natural condition of mind," declared the man with the little mustache.

He drummed his pencil reflectively upon his desk. Something about his manner caused Joe uneasiness; gave him a feeling of impending disappointment, he knew not why.

Seeing that his employer did not immediately reply, the boy added: "I suppose everything has been settled by this time, Mr. Spiess,—the team fully made up and schedule arranged?"

"Well, no, Joe, I can't say that it is," was the response, as the supposed reporter put on a sorrowful face. "I've worked like a horse to bring things around while you were gone, but luck seems to be against me. To be frank with you, I don't believe we can make a go of the Atlantic Independents this summer."

Joe's spirits, already on the quiver, went down to zero.

"You don't mean to say you are going to drop the idea of having a team?" demanded the youth.

"I'm sorry, Joe; that's it."

"But why?"

"Well, you see the catcher I've been figuring on has flunked out; been drafted. The fact is, some of the infielders I had surely counted on have also been conscripted by the Government and ordered to go to various training-camps for soldiers."

"Can't you find others to fill in?" asked Joe, hopefully.

"It's pretty hard. The war is taking all the young ball players. You see it doesn't affect us, entirely, but I find the teams we thought to get games with in bad shape from the same cause. I don't seem to be able to get dates with them."

"Then you have really made up your mind to drop the idea?"

"Yes; there's not much else to do."

"That means I'm left flat, I suppose," said Joe, bitterly. "I dare say you'll expect me to give you back the hundred you let me have on advance salary?"

"On the contrary, no. You are welcome to that."

"Huh! Good thing. I haven't got more than twenty of it left," grunted Joe. "I'll need that to get home with, the way it looks. I—"

Just then the outer door was heard to open, and some one to enter the main office. Excus-

ing himself, Spiess stepped to the portal communicating with the adjoining apartment.

"It is my office girl," he announced, turning again to his caller. "I will have to ask you to wait a few minutes until I have her take down an important letter which I wish to get off on the next mail."

"Yes, sir," responded Joe, and Spiess went out into the other room, where the boy could presently hear him dictating.

Having nothing else to do, Joe allowed his eyes to wander idly over the open desk of the insurance man, which, as stated previously, was right at his elbow. A letter, with envelope beside it, finally arrested his attention. The writing was coarse and irregular. To amuse himself—for Joe had few compunctions about such matters—he began to casually glance over it. Judge of his astonishment when his eyes became riveted upon the name "Joe Laporte!" Quickly he glanced at the signature. That, too, was familiar. "Red!"

What could it mean? Why was Red, whom he supposed to be in the city, writing a letter about him? Before Joe could answer the query by reading the communication, he heard the footsteps of Spiess coming toward the door. Hardly knowing why he did so, Joe shoved the sheet into his coat pocket.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting this way," said Spiess, resuming his seat. "Now, as I said a few moments ago, you are welcome to the money I gave you. Let that stand as a small compensation for the trouble I have unwittingly made you."

"Oh, that's all right; I don't suppose you could help it," interjected Joe. "Just the same I wish I had not quit the boys now. I made a mess of things by doing that. I suppose they have gone before this?"

"Yes," assented the man; "they left last Monday, I believe. They are probably almost home by now. It would hardly pay you to try to overtake them."

"I don't propose trying it if I could," said Joe. He would have felt ashamed to seek them after his own questionable conduct, but he was careful not to mention this reason to his companion. "Do you know the names of the towns they arranged to play?" added the French lad.

"I don't," lied Spiess, who had no idea of furnishing any such information at this stage of the game. "I would go directly home if I were you, Joe."

"That's what I mean to do," said Joe, making the very reply the astute pro-German hoped to hear. "What have become of Gus and Red, now that you have decided not to use them in baseball?"

"Oh," said Spiess, glibly, "Red has joined another team in Connecticut, and Gus has enlisted in the army."

"Well, Mr. Spiess, I believe I'll be going. I think I shall try to catch the afternoon train for home. Good-bye, sir."

"Good-bye and good luck, Joe," said Spiess, also rising and taking the boy's hand. "Sorry things turned out the way they did. If I organize a team next summer I'll be sure to want you for first-pitcher."

Joe was soon out of the building. At the second corner he crossed the street into City Hall Park, where he dropped down upon the first empty bench, and curiously proceeded to read the letter he had filched from the supposed reporter's desk. For some unexplained reason he had, since the moment of seeing his own name scrawled upon the page in front of him, entertained a vague suspicion of the pleasant-mannered Spiess. And as he read now, his eyes fairly bulged out in his surprise and indignation.

This is what the poor writing disclosed:

"Planefeald, N. J., Aug. 22nd.

"Mr. William Spiess,
New York, N. Y.

"Friend Bill:

"Bill we got them hikers going sum all right, and me

and gus is carrying out your plans to a dot. So far, this is thirsday morning, gus has maid them lose wun gaim with elizabeth and he is going to maik them lose the other wun too that they will play this afternoon with plane feald if he can. That was a good skeam of yours too get Joe laport out of the way and gus in. Keep Joe in boston as long as you like but you wont need too after this weak becaws by that time me and gus will have put these Hikers out of bizness. they dont suspect gus, and as fur me i keap out of site. Now lissen bill i aint set any barns afire yet but i am going to fire a big wun here too nite if gus gives me the o.k. mark. and lissen wunce more, when the Hikers get to Somerville which will be satterday i think we can bust them up fur good, as i am going to touch off anuther barn and this time we will fix things so the people will think these boys are setting the fires, and they will get intoo a peck of trubble and that will forever cure them I reckon of playing enny more gaims and helping farmers and giving theyre money too this cussed red cross bizness. trust gus and me too do a good job bill. Weal see you soon in new York.

"Yours fur the fatherland,

"RED.

"P. s.

"Better send Joe laporte home before we cum back."

Joe re-read the letter several times, till it had fairly burned itself into his brain. His face was hot with mingled shame, indignation, anger. For the first time he came to realize what a fool he had been, how blind he was to have thus unwittingly played into the hands of this trio of scoundrels who had used him as a tool for furthering their devilish designs upon his own

country at the expense of his patriotic, unsuspecting chums!

For a few minutes the French boy's anger was so great, as he thought of how he had been duped, that he made up his mind to go straight-way to the office of the false reporter and have it out with him, telling him to his face of his treachery, and letting him know that he (Joe) would immediately expose him to the authorities.

Then his better judgment re-asserting itself, he resolved upon a more sensible course. He had to swallow a good deal of self-humiliation in this. But the welfare of his country was at stake, as well as the safety of his old friends; and when it came right down to a pinch of this kind, I am glad to say that Joe was able to forget self.

"I will take the first train I can get for Somerville!" decided the former Boy Hiker. "The boys will probably be there over Sunday, which is to-morrow. I hope I won't be too late."

CHAPTER XXII

AT THE MERCY OF THE ENEMY

IT is not to be thought for a moment that Jack Westwood, upon finding himself suddenly beset in the haunted house, tamely submitted to being pinned to the floor by the red-faced man.

The boy gave no thought to why Gus Wettlaufer seemed to be abetting his rude assailant; it was quite enough to realize that he was apparently in the hands of an enemy. The malicious look upon the rough faces of both men showed conclusively that they were accomplices, and that the attack upon him boded him no good, whatever its purpose might be.

Jack struggled desperately to free himself from the clutches of the red-faced man. He was an unusually strong and wiry youth for his age, and although taken at a great disadvantage he fought so hard that the burly fellow on him had the utmost difficulty to hold him. In fact, several times Jack's twistings and squirmings threatened to displace his enemy, and the lad might eventually have succeeded in effecting

his freedom had his assailant not appealed to Gus. The latter seized Jack by the neck, cruelly choking him till he lay gasping for breath, quite unable, for the moment at least, to struggle longer.

Then, while the older man held him, Gus struck another match. By the light of this he discovered Jack's flashlight on the floor, where the boy had laid it upon going to sleep. With this better light he proceeded to tie his wrists behind his back with a piece of rope which he pulled from his pocket. Wrenching free the length of wire that dangled from the ceiling in the adjoining room, the city fellow next secured the prisoner's feet at the ankles.

"There, Red; he's safe now, believe me, Mary!" declared Gus, rising from his knees with a grunt of relief. The red-faced man also straightened up.

"Don't wonder that this guy got the best o' you in that scrap you had with him, Gus!" grunted Red, still short of wind as a result of his efforts to subdue his victim. "Jinnybunk, but he's a reg'lar out an' out wildcat! Lucky neether one o' us had to handle him erlone."

"Didn't I tell you I'd better be here when you tackled him?" propounded Gus. "First, when I got word to you he was going to sleep here to-night, you said you could take care of

him alone. I knew you couldn't do it, without you laid him out cold while he slept."

"Well, I didn't think you'd have any chanct then to git away from them Hikers without causin' 'spishun. You playin' off skeered o' their campin' place, guv us jest the chanct we wanted, eh?"

"Oh, I got some head on me, Red! But to tell the darned honest truth, I ain't any too fond of hanging around this joint. Believe me, Mary, it's a mighty creepy sort of place! There—Guns! what in thunder was *that*?"

A low wailing sound, accompanied by a guttural rasping somewhere above their heads had been plainly heard. It had lasted but a moment, but that moment had been almost a life-time to the frightened Gus, whose teeth chattered noticeably as he spoke. Evidently his companion was made of sterner stuff, for he gave a short, impatient laugh.

"Don't be a baby, Gus!" he admonished. "That ain't nothin' only that old tree outside a-rubbin' on the roof up there."

"I *hope* to goodness that's what it is," said Gus. "But, even so, I ain't got any hankering to fool around here any longer than what we've got to. According to the story old Wigginholt told us, this must be the very room where those old maid sisters took the poison and—"

The substitute did not finish, but stood violently shaking, as speechless as a stone image. While he talked he had allowed his eyes to drift toward the window, and his companion noted that he seemed to be staring at something. Looking himself, Red saw what Jack had already seen once before that night—a pair of fiery-looking eyes set in a moving white background which was itself surrounded by the Egyptian blackness of the night without.

The prostrate boy smiled to himself, despite his uncomfortable position, as he noticed that Red too showed unmistakable signs of nervousness. He prayed that they would be frightened out of the building forthwith.

But this was not to be. Only an instant did the older man lose control of himself. Then, seizing the flashlight which the frightened Gus held limply in his hand, Red dashed its light toward the jagged window frame, as Jack had done. In the bright rays all could see the curious, docile old face of a white horse. Both men yelled, waving their arms, and the next moment the animal had shambled off, undoubtedly wondering what manner of strange tenants the old Harkness house had at last begun to shelter.

“What are you laughing at, you smart Aleck?” cried Gus, angrily, wheeling about in

time to see the amused look upon the captive's face. "Anybody might think you'd been seeing something darned funny!"

"I reckon he has, Gus," put in Red, with a sardonic grin as he played the light over Jack's helpless form. "You better go through his pockets now, I reckon. Do you think he's got any o' that money they took in at the ball game yesterday?"

"I know he ain't," was the decisive rejoinder. "Cuss him, he and his mates are mighty careful to get the ball game money in the bank right away. I saw him put it in myself this afternoon. But he's probably got some money of his own in his pockets."

"Go after it, then. We might jest as well have it," said Red.

Thereupon poor Jack had to submit, while Gus ransacked his garments, confiscating several dollars that he had in his purse. Not content with this, he also took his jeweled compass and jack-knife.

"Gus, what does this mean? I thought you were a friend of ours," said Jack.

"Friend nothing!" ejaculated the substitute bitterly. "Maybe I did pretend to be, but I had an object in it. Do you think I would let any guy bat the jaw off of me like you did, Westwood, and not try to get even for it? Now

my time has come, and believe me, Mary, you're going to pay for being so fresh! When you had me down you imposed your conditions on me, and made me take that old chick back and apologize to the guy that owned it. Now I've got you down, and by blazes you're going to come to *our* terms before you go free."

"What has this man got to do with it? He wasn't in our little row," said Jack.

"Never mind, sonny, what I got to do with it," grinned Red. "It's enough fer you to know that I got more to do with this than you think, eh, Gus? But say, Gus, what's that I hear you callin' this here chap? Westwood? I knowed a youngster by that name—Earl Westwood—one time. Yer name ain't Earl?" he added, again addressing the boy; "that is, anyways, you ain't the Earl I knowed. He would be consid'able older'n you now. Was on the road with me 'bout ten years or so ago. He was only 'bout fifteen then, an' I ain't seen him sence. Mebbe he's a cousin o' yours. Know him?"

If Jack had had any doubts before as to whether this rough fellow was the "Red" who, with Limpy Mike, had kidnapped One-Wing years before and compelled him to accompany them in their trampings about the country till he escaped, they were now completely set at rest. More than that, he was quite certain that

it was really Red whom they had seen in New York, and later leaving camp where he had been conversing with Gus the afternoon they had played Elizabeth. Manifestly, from One-Wing's tale of the coarse nature of this man, he (Jack) would now have a hard customer with whom to deal. He could well understand why one of Gus's revengeful disposition might wish to do him harm, but could not understand why Red himself should feel evilly disposed toward him.

"Know him?" persisted Red.

"I do; and what's more, I know you," returned the boy.

"Oh, you do?" sneered Gus. "Who be I now, if yer so smart?"

"You are known by the name of 'Red.' Together with a partner by the name of 'Limp Mike,' you stole Earl Westwood and made him beg for several years. You are dressed better now, but you are really nothing but a tramp."

"Seems to have you down fine, Red," laughed Gus Wettlaufer. "Wonder if he knows me as well?"

"I know you to be a precious scoundrel, Gus Wettlaufer!" exclaimed Jack, boldly, without mincing his words. "I now more than half suspect you did your best to make us lose every game we've played on this trip!"

"And you ain't very far out of the way," boasted Gus, angrily. "What's more, I did cause you guys to lose the first two! It was just luck you got this last one with Somerville, believe me, Mary! I tried my best to make you lose that one."

"Your confession is refreshing. Well, what are you going to do with me, now that you have tied me hand and foot?"

"Jest this," said Red, solemnly. "Me an' Gus here wants you to write a note to them Hikers of yourn tellin' 'em to go straight on home without workin' fer farmers any more or playin' baseball, an' not wait fer you as you've decided to go back to New York fer a few days. If you do this it will be the easiest way out fer everybody, becuz we won't harm you an' will let you go as soon as we think yer bunch is far enough ahead so you can't ketch 'em."

"Why are you so anxious to have us stop our games and farmwork?" asked the prisoner. "Don't you know that by this very work we are helping our Government to wage a harder war against the Huns?"

"Yes, cuss you!" snarled Red, showing his yellow teeth; "an' fer that very reason you've got to stop it!"

Jack's eyes opened wide. Up to that moment he had never once suspected the loyalty

of these two men. Now, as he realized, in a flood, the import of it all—the suggestion of Spiess that they should discontinue this same work, his part in getting Gus into the Boy Hiker organization, and the fact that both Spiess and Gus had a Teutonic name, and Red's appearance proclaimed such an ancestrage—he was almost dumfounded. Could it be that all three of these men were banded together in an effort to prevent by force that which suggestion and persuasion could not accomplish? It seemed highly probable! If true, then the Boy Hikers had not only been harboring in their midst, in Gus, a fellow of disagreeable and untrustworthy nature, but a veritable traitor and enemy spy!

The thought quite took Jack's breath away for a moment. By the fiercest effort he controlled himself.

"Well, be you goin' to write that note to yer friends?" persisted Red.

"Yes, Westwood; speak up quick about it."

"No; I am not!"

"Then," said Red, grimly, "we got to take stronger measures, as I told you. It's our job to see this Red Cross money stops a-goin' in to 'em, an' we never fall down on a job. If you won't do this, to-morrer night me an' Gus will carry out our orig'nal plan. We'll set fire to that big barn where you fellers worked this

mornin' and fix it so't 'spishun will be thrown on you an' yer friends. Mebbe you'll kinder recall a lot o' barns with grain in 'em are goin' up in flames round the country, an' that one jest burned back there by Plainfield."

More light! The mystery of that fire, the queer tramp sign read by One-Wing, seemed now logically explained. Red, abetted by Gus, must have been responsible for it!

"You wretch!" cried the horror-stricken and indignant boy; "so it was you and Gus who burned that barn of Wall's!"

"Well, even so, what you going to do about it?" taunted Gus.

"You will see if I ever get free from these ropes!" cried Jack, struggling unavailingly.

His captors laughed their derision. Gus pulled something of a tubular shape from his pocket, and let the beams of the flashlight play over it.

"See that, Westwood?" he said with a grin.

"My match-safe! Where did you get that, Gus Wettlaufer? I thought I had lost it several days ago?"

"You see you didn't. As I don't expect to ever want to play with your team again, Westwood, I may safely say now that I took this little trinket out of your pocket while you stood near me one day. That's a sort of trick I

picked up when I used to be tramping it with Red here, you know, and it comes in mighty handy sometimes since I quit the road. This match-safe has got your name carved in its side. Now if you don't write that note—"

At this point Red interrupted him to say something in a low tone in his ear. Jack noticed Gus's coarse face blanch. But the pallor quickly left it, as he went on:

"Red thinks it's too late for you to write the note now. You know too much about our business for our health, it's easy to see that. We've got to do the other thing after all, only make it a little worse than what we planned first. We've got to fix you for keeps, Westwood, so you can't squeal on us or Bill Spiess afterwards!"

"What do you mean?" cried the boy, with a terrible dread tugging at his heart.

"Me an' Gus means that to-morrer night that big barn goes up with all its *contents*," said Red with impressive, fiendish emphasis. "We're goin' to make you a part o' them same *contents*, though, first! An' when the farmers dig round in the ashes next day they'll find bits o' you, prob'ly, an' when they pick up yer match-safe nearby they'll say sure that you an' yer friends has been settin' barns a-fire, an' they'll be mobbed in short order. I reckon *that'll* finish yer Red Cross work, won't it?"

Jack made no answer, but the cold sweat came out in beads upon his forehead.

A few minutes later he was gagged with his own bandana, carried into a smaller apartment, and dropped down through a trap-door into a musty hole that some day must have served the former inmates of the old house as a fruit-cellar. Then he heard Gus and Red leave the building, and all was still, except for creaks and groans of aged timbers that now seemed actually to relieve the terrible quietness of the night.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SEARCH

TIRED out from the strenuous activities of the preceding day, and having nothing particular to do but rest Sunday, our boys slept late. Perhaps, too, the fact that some of them were just a little uneasy the evening before because their camp was situated upon the scene of the Harkness sisters' morbid visits years before, had something to do with a late retirement, or at least a belated falling asleep, and thereby caused a later arising than customary.

Be that as it may, all were astir by eight o'clock. Practically every boy crawled out of his pup-tent fully expecting to find that Jack had returned from his lonely and spooky nap in the haunted house at the other side of the woods; but to inquiries not one could say that he had seen the young leader yet.

"Must be enjoying his nap," declared Tiny.

"Probably was the same with Jack as with me last night," was Ben's frank confession. "I bet I laid awake for two hours, when I first went

to bed, listening to every little crackle of a stick and moan of the wind in the woods around here, and all the time thinking how much like those noises it would be if those Harkness sisters were meandering about, sobbing the way Farmer Wigginholt said they used to! When I did get to sleep I could hardly wake up, it seemed. Probably Jack's still asleep."

"More like the spooks have finished him!" put in Tim, who was probably the most superstitious one of the party. "Jerkins, I wouldn't have done what Jack did for a farm!"

"Spooks, shucks!" scoffed the practical Ears. "There isn't any such silly thing, Tim. By the way, fellows, has anybody seen Gus Wettlaufer this morning?"

"Here he comes now," said One-Wing.

All eyes were at once directed to the opening in the shrubbery from which the substitute could be seen emerging just then. Gus carried his pack upon his shoulders, as he had done upon going out the evening before to seek a more congenial sleeping spot. As he came up several of the boys could not help noticing that his eyes were heavy and spiritless.

"Guess you didn't sleep much last night, did you, Gus?" said big Tiny, with a grin.

"Why?" came the quick, suspicious rejoinder.

"Thought you had that appearance, that's

all," returned Tiny, innocently. "Your eyes look as if you'd have to prop 'em open pretty soon to keep 'em from closing up on you."

Gus essayed a rather mirthless laugh. "Oh," said he, "the ground was pretty hard where I bunked up-stream a bit, and I didn't sleep as well as I might. How'd you fellows make it here with the ghosts?"

"Fine, Gus," answered One-Wing, jocularly. "We slaughtered three of the varmints with a blade o' grass, an' are goin' to make some Sunday shirts out o' the white gowns we took off'n 'em! Better sleep with us to-night, so you won't miss the fun."

"Not fer me," was the declaration. "I'm satisfied where I was. Where's Jack? Hasn't he turned up yet?"

"Not yet," put in Clare. "The service in his hotel is so superfine, I fancy he hates to relinquish it. You see he has plenty of attendants, all dressed in snowy livery, to wait upon him. Probably one of them stood by his bunk and fanned him all night and he has enjoyed it so he hasn't woke up yet."

No one noticed the baleful look in the dark eyes of Gus as Clare made this grandiloquent effort. If the boys had known just how much the substitute knew at that moment about the whereabouts of the boy they liked so much,

there would have been everything going on for Gus but jesting!

The Hikers now made a rush for the creek for their regular morning dip before breakfast, and for a short while had a merry time disporting themselves about in the cool waters, diving, swimming, floating, playing pull-away and tag, and burying their bodies in the warm sands by the edge of the stream.

In the midst of this frolicking, Ben climbed to the topmost boughs of the big cottonwood which stood on the bank, and some of the other lads began an argument as to the height of his climb, one claiming one figure and another another. When the controversy became rather warm, Ears settled it very expeditiously.

"It's easy to tell the height of any tree without a bit of guessing, fellows," he said. "On a sunny day like this you can determine heights of natural objects by a comparison of shadow lengths. It is plain that if a stick six feet long casts a six-foot shadow, a tree sixty feet high will cast a sixty-foot shadow at the same hour. So by using a stick of any known dimension, and making a simple mathematical calculation the height of any object is accurately told. All you have to do is to multiply the length of the shadow of the object by the length of the stick, and divide the result by the length

of the stick's shadow. The resulting figure gives the height of the object."

"All very nice, Earsey boy," commented Grease, trying futilely to cover his fat limbs with sand, "but how do you measure your stick and shadows when you haven't a rule or yardstick along?"

"Easy enough," said One-Wing. "If a chap gits a little used to it he kin pace off three feet nearly every clip, fer long measurements. Fer short ones all he has to do is to use some part of his body. Fer instance, if I want an inch I jest lay my thumb down an' I know the breadth of its widest part will cover jest the inch. If I want three inches I put the thumb down that many times. If I want six inches I hustle up matters by spreadin' my first finger an' thumb apart as fur as they'll easily go, an' from tip o' thumb to tip o' finger makes it. If I want a foot, I set my foot down becuz I know that with my shoe on its jest twelve inches long. If I want a foot an' a half I kin get it the quickest by measuring from my elbow to the tip o' my longest finger. And so on till I git to a yard which I kin find by pacin', as I said afore, or if the situation makes that awkward, I stretch a string or strip o' bark or branch of a tree, from my chin to the tips o' my fingers of one hand, with the arm out straight, an' then

mark the strip at the right distance. If I want six feet, I kin git it by doublin' this yard measurement, or I kin make a new 'ruler' by spreadin' both arms out an' markin' the distance from finger tip to finger tip."

"That might do for you," said Grease, but the breadth of your thumb and mine would not agree, One-Wing."

"Good gracious, no!" interpolated Clare; "nor your bodies, either. Grease, you'll have to multiply One-Wing's measurements by three to make them fit your *tiny* parts!"

"Well, as to that, you will find no two bodies will always agree," laughed the one-armed young man. "Everybody has to find out what measurements will fit his parts, the same as I did. I've got my growth, an' what's an inch on me now will probably stay an inch fer years to come. But it's different with a growin' boy. Till he's twenty-one he better re-measure himself every year an' adjust his 'rule' accordingly. But this knowin' how to get the measurement you want by yer body is a mighty handy thing, especially to any boy who likes to roam about in the woods."

The Hikers averred their intention of mastering this system, but first began to test out Ears's method of ascertaining the height of a tree or other object by shadow lengths. This was great

fun. It took but a moment for them to come to the universal agreement that the old cottonwood in whose top Ben had taken refuge was seventy-two feet high.

"But I don't see how a fellow could find the height of a tree or building on a cloudy day," stated Tiny. "This plan would only work with the sun shining."

"That's true," admitted Ears; "a fellow needs the sun for this method. But I happen to know how a person can get a height just about as accurately on overcast days. My brother Ned, who is now a civil engineer, showed it to me one time. This is the triangle method. Cut a sapling that will reach a couple inches above your eyes. Sharpen one end and stick the pole into the ground in an upright position so that its top will just meet your eyes. This must be done as far away from the tree as you calculate its height to be. Lie down on your back, with feet against the stick and head away from the tree. Sight over the tip of the stick to the tip of the tree. If you can't line them up, then go back farther with your stick, or approach closer, as required. When the sighting is all right, you have formed two perfect right-angled triangles. So by measuring the distance from your eye to the base of the tree, along the ground, you may know that the height of the tree or other object is exactly the same."

"Let's cut some sticks with our hand-axes and try that scheme out, fellows," proposed Tim.

"All right," agreed Grease, struggling up, "but first somebody tell me why a tree is like a dog, will he?"

"Give it up; why?" asked Ben who had descended from his high perch.

"Because it begins with little bough-wows and later develops a heavy bark," replied Grease.

The last half of this was shouted from behind the big cottonwood. It was a wise precaution, as two pairs of pants went hurtling through the air in Grease's direction at that moment.

"Very well done," remarked Clare, "Now while we are on the subject, who knows why a pine tree is like a soda-fountain?"

"Yum, yum! If you'll produce the fountain we'll let the tree go," said Grease, venturing forth and rubbing his stomach and smacking his lips.

"Oh, of course, for you,—if there's anything to eat in it!" growled Tiny. "Well, use your gray matter, fellows! Why is a pine tree like a soda-fountain?"

"If you'd ask why a banana tree struck by lightning was like a soda-fountain it would be easy," suggested Clare.

"Why?"

"Because both furnish a banana-split."

"For goodness' sake don't spoil my little pun with such brilliant parodies!" groaned Tiny. "Come, somebody wake up! Why is a pine tree like a soda-fountain?"

The big fellow did not notice that Clare had whispered something into the ear of Ben and that the message had gone the rounds by relay.

Therefore, he was almost staggered now, as they all shouted in unison:

"Because each one furnishes cones! Give us something hard!"

"Who squealed that?" demanded Tiny, belligerently. But they all scampered off, laughing, after axes with which to cut stakes.

A little later breakfast was cooked, but much of the natural gayety of the boys seemed to be lacking, as they ate, for Jack had not appeared. And when another half hour had elapsed, they became actually uneasy.

"Maybe he's skipped out on you like Joe did," suggested Gus, darkly, but of course not one of them would entertain such a thought. Indeed, it is probable they would have upbraided Gus for hinting at such a thing had he not been with them such a comparatively short time and thereby had less chance to know their young leader than they. As it was, the substitute's

hint met with only pitying glances and a disdainful silence that quite squelched him from any further reflections against the character of the noble boy he hated.

Not long after this, it was proposed to try and find the haunted house and make a search of the premises. Led by One-Wing, the Hikers started off, and not a great while afterward came to the old Harkness homestead.

From room to room they went, upstairs and down, carefully looking for clues that might lead to some understanding of the situation. Before any one entered the pantry, Gus managed to work into that apartment ahead, and as he saw Ears open the door as if to also enter, the substitute started out saying hastily, "Nothing in here, Ears. I've been looking it all over. Not even the dust on the floor seems to be disturbed."

Unfortunately for poor Jack, a prisoner in the dark chamber of the little fruit-cellar beneath that portion of the floor, Ears retired with no more than a cursory look within, and Gus breathed easier. But the rascal was careful to hang about as long as the other boys roamed through the old structure, to ward off other investigations of the pantry. So adroitly did he do this that no one suspected his guilt, apparently.

In the front room the thick dust on the floor was greatly disturbed and there were two burnt matches. They rightly came to the conclusion that Jack must have slept here, but aside from this could gain no clue to what might have taken place or where he had gone. Other rooms, also, had shown marks of somebody entering and retiring, but it was impossible to tell whether one or more persons had caused them.

When it was found that apparently no cellar or attic was in the building, the boys went outside, quite non-plussed. After a discussion, they visited the Wigginholt farm. But here too they were doomed to disappointment; none of the family had seen Jack, and were quite surprised and worried to find out what had happened. They thought that when the Hikers returned to camp the missing youth would probably be found there awaiting them.

Imbued by this hope the boys hurried back to Suicide Hollow. But still no Jack. By this time it was well along in the afternoon. All were hot and fatigued, yet after something to eat, they made their way into town to see if some trace could not be found of the missing youth there.

To all their inquiries, however, there was no information of a satisfactory character. Ears

suggested going to the sheriff, but One-Wing declared he thought it too early to make such a fuss, whereupon all agreed to wait until the following morning before taking this drastic step. They attended worship that evening in one of the Somerville churches, and then started back for Suicide Hollow.

The night was cloudy and very dark. When they came to the ravine they had to pick their way along very slowly up to the Hollow, where they had concealed their packs in the brush. These were brought out, and every fellow began the task of erecting his pup-tent.

During the progress of these operations, Gus slung his pack over his shoulder, bade them a brief good-night and started upstream for his own camping-place, laughing none too good-naturedly at their parting gibes about his fear of spooks. He had no sooner gotten well out of sight, however, when One-Wing called the boys together in a hurry by imperative gestures of arm and a low, tense tone that made them jump like crickets.

"Boys," said the one-armed Hiker in an excitement that he made no further effort to suppress, "I'm suspicious of that Wettlaufer. I don't know why, but I noticed he carries chalk with him; and you'll remember that tramp sign on Wall's gate-post, near the barn that burnt?

That was made with chalk. I know that ain't so much, but to-day I noticed another sign jest like t'other one, an' this one is on Wigginholt's fence near *his* barn, an' I'll swear I remember seein' Gus near that spot yesterday afternoon, as we was leavin' fer the game. You'll have to own up, when you stop to think of it, that we don't know anything good about this feller, only what Spiess said about him, an' what do we really know about Spiess's character? Nothin'! We've already seen enough to know Gus is a bad customer. Now, I watched him like a hawk to-day, an' he acted mighty queer about Jack. Somehow, I got a notion he knows somethin' about where he is, an' I'm goin' to foller Gus now an' watch him to-night, jest to set my mind easy. You kids hang round an' keep mum, an' wait fer me, that's all!"

With these startling words, uttered faster than they can be read, One-Wing disappeared stealthily into the blackness of the night in the direction Gus had taken, leaving some astonished lads behind him.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE RIGHT TRAIL

DURING One-Wing's exposition of his suspicions to his friends, Gus Wettlaufer had gained considerable headway. So well had he progressed, in fact, that the follower had not proceeded far before he became obsessed with the uncomfortable idea that the city fellow had passed out of his hearing.

Among the trees by the stream, One-Wing now halted and listened intently. Long used to differentiating between the noises of nature and those made by prowling bodies, by reason of his life as a tramp, his astute ear soon detected the kind of sound he had been hoping to catch. From some point up-stream on that side, he heard the faint crackle of a dead branch, shortly followed by a similar snapping noise, evidently made by the pressure of an unguarded foot.

"Gus doesn't suspect for a moment that he is likely to be trailed," thought One-Wing. "That will make my job of followin' him a lot easier, as he won't take any care o' how much noise he makes in coverin' the ground."

As if to verify this assertion, there now came the sound of a splash, accompanied by an ejaculation of anger. The one-armed Hiker grinned to himself, as he stole carefully along in the direction of the disturbances. "That's Gus all right," muttered One-Wing. "He has stepped in some water in the dark, an' don't like the experience a little bit!"

He heard a resumption of the noises marking the passage of the substitute along the creek bottom, and when he had drawn a little closer, settled down to maintaining the distance between them with the utmost caution. Gus kept on for perhaps ten minutes. By that time he had reached an opening among the trees, and sat down upon a large boulder.

One-Wing paused in the edge of the undergrowth to watch. He saw a match flare up, lighting Gus's coarse features, as the fellow applied the flame to a cigar he held between his teeth. The next moment the flare died out, but the sitter was still there as attested by the vague outline of his form and a tiny fiery spot at the end of his cigar.

A minute or two passed. Then a sharp, sibilant whistle arose from the stone. Once, twice, thrice, it was repeated. Barely had the last echoes died out, when the watcher discovered another dim form—this one approach-

ing Gus from the opposite side of the clearing.

One-Wing's heart beat fast. His suspicions of Gus seemed to be well-founded. Gus was playing his comrades crooked, else why this pre-arranged clandestine meeting between him and this stranger?

Stranger? By all that was marvelous, no! The newcomer was Red!—Red, the tramp!—the scallywag whom he had not seen for ten years or more!—the miscreant who had kept him away from home when a boy, with Limpy Mike, and made him beg and steal to support their worthless bodies! For now, although he could not see his face or recognize his form in the dark, One-Wing heard that voice that he would have known anywhere at any time.

"Well, Gus, I see you got through yer day with them Hiker kids. Didn't have any hitches with 'em, I hope?"

"Not a hitch, Red; everything was smooth sailing. They're worrying a lot about the guy we've got tied up, and made a visit there to-day to look for him, but I kept 'em out of the pantry, and everything's all right for our little job to-night. They're planning on going to the sheriff in Somerville in the morning, to report Westwood's absence, but we'll be on our way to New York by then."

"An' that barn will be in ashes, the kid with

it; an' the other Hikers will be in a heap o' trouble, accused of settin' the fire!" came the gruff tones of the man whom One-Wing had once mortally feared, but whom he would no longer hesitate to engage under equal conditions, even with only one arm.

So thoroughly provoked was he now that it is doubtful if he could have restrained his impulse to dash out and demand of the men the information of Jack's whereabouts, had not the presence of the burly substitute at once ridiculed such a plan as foolish and impracticable. He would have to bide his time.

"Well, there ain't no use of us chawing the rag here all night, Red," stated Gus, rising and offering his companion a cigar and light. "We've got lots to do, and I want to get done with it and on the train for New York where I can find a soft bunk and have a good snooze. I'm blasted near all in, not having any sleep to amount to anything last night."

"You ain't lost no more sleep'n I have," declared Red. "We'll take the short cut through the woods, same as we did last night. Come on. Snap on yer flasher."

The two men moved off and vanished in the shrubbery. One-Wing cautiously followed. He was glad that they were using a light to pick their way through the woods, as he could

catch the yellow beams of this quite a distance ahead, and as long as he could move along without betraying himself it would be a comparatively easy matter to trail the rascals.

As he worked his way carefully along his mind dwelt constantly upon the startling discoveries he had made that night. It was manifest to him now that in all probability it was Red himself whom he had seen getting off a street car one day while the boys were in the big city, and that it was also Red who had been in conference with Gus there in the camp near Elizabeth. It was likewise quite apparent that one or both of these rogues had made Jack a prisoner. For what purpose he could not conceive, but it was plain that not only was the big barn of Wigginholt's in dire peril from flames but the life of the captive was threatened by the same danger.

Not long after this, the two men emerged upon the other side of the woods. Before them, under the dark, starless sky stood the old Harkness place. One-Wing clung to the deep shadows of the timber. He saw the obscure forms of the followed ones disappear from view under the sagging porch. Several times he was on the point of stealing up to the building itself, in his great impatience.

Finally, just as he thought he could bear the

suspense no longer, the men re-appeared, dragging some object with them. This form seemed able to stand upon its feet. One man stooped outside and busied himself near it and the ground, while the other turned the flashlight upon the spot where his companion worked.

"It's Jack!" thought One-Wing with a joyous flutter of the heart, as he realized that the boy was at least alive. "They're cuttin' the ropes around his ankles so't he kin walk, I reckon."

This surmise was verified a moment later. As the stooping man arose, the light for an instant swept up into the motionless figure's face. It was Jack without a question. But how pale and ghastly he looked in that yellow stream of rays! And something was bound around his mouth, evidently a gag.

"That's why he couldn't yell and make us hear him when we were in the house," thought One-Wing. "There must be a celler or closet in there we couldn't find, an' they've had him in there. Jim Crow! but it's tough some of the kids ain't here to help me! I'd never stand here like an old stump an' watch them fellers lead Jack off if they was, or even if I had one more good wing!"

But he did not have "one more good wing," unfortunately for his peace of mind just then, and so One-Wing was forced to curb his valor

under the lash of good common-sense, and remain quiet while Red and Gus, the latter flourishing a pistol which the skulker knew had been deadly enough to one time kill an "old chick," ordered their prisoner off down the by-path that led in the direction of the main road.

During this march, the flashlight was again brought into requisition by the rogues, and One-Wing found no trouble in keeping track of them without danger of exposing his own presence.

At the road, the men paused for a few minutes and looked both ways, as if to satisfy themselves that all was well. Then they made their prisoner go up the thoroughfare in the direction of the Wigginholt farm. Afraid that he might be seen out in the open roadway, One-Wing crossed the road and skulked along in the shadows of the fences on the opposite side. In this manner he was able to maintain a fairly close proximity to the men he was following without undue risk of discovery should they suddenly look backward.

As they neared the Wigginholt premises, One-Wing saw that evidently the family had retired for the night, as no lights shone from the windows of the house. Everything seemed to favor the ulterior motives of the black-hearted scoundrels who held Jack a prisoner. One-Wing had hoped that some of the Wigginholts

would still be up, so that he could summon aid before Red and Gus could effect their escape. As it was, this now seemed out of the question. He ground his teeth bitterly.

One-Wing slipped under the rail fence, and crouching low, sped along its field side in the darkest shadows of the zig-zagging barrier. By the time Red and Gus had reached the big gate giving access to the barnyard, he was only a few rods distant. He saw the men stop, and Gus flash his light guardedly over one of the gate boards. In the circle of yellow he could plainly distinguish the same kind of chalked tramp sign he and the boys had found upon the fence of the Wall farm just after the burning of that barn.

"You see here it is—just where I put it for you, Red, the day we worked on this place," came the tones of Gus. "I thought you'd need it then in order to know whether to fire this one that night or not, but you see we changed our minds and were able to make a double shot of it by waiting till to-night. So much for this chap here for so kindly letting it out before hand that he intended to sleep in the haunted house that night!"

"Rub it out," said Red. "There ain't no use in leavin' the sign now."

Thereupon Gus worked industriously for a

few moments with his coat sleeve. When the marks were half-obliterated he said impatiently, "Come on, Red; that's good enough," and the pair noiselessly opened the gate and led their prisoner through.

Across the dark barnyard they stole. It was only a little way to the barn, and presently they halted within its shadows. Here a struggle seemed to take place. One-Wing had been forced, to prevent being seen, to follow more slowly, and was unable to see what transpired, but judged that Jack was making a last effort to escape. If so he was apparently unsuccessful, for the disturbance was of short duration. One-Wing heard a sharp click, as of a lock or hasp being tampered with, and then one of the barn doors slowly opened, and two dark figures, carrying a third, moved through the aperture and disappeared in the blackness within.

A moment later, while the watcher fretted and fumed inwardly, with action split between openly attacking the miscreants and dashing for the house and arousing the inmates, two figures came hastily out of the big barn, and slunk away into the lane that led down through the pastureland into the woods back of the property. A little farther along, he saw these men, who could be none other than Red and Gus, straighten up and run down the lane at top speed.

Almost as he observed this, One-Wing became aware that the pungent smell of burning hay was reaching his keen nostrils. Quickly he turned toward the barn again.

His nose had not deceived him! From one corner of the big pine structure, near the ground, a long tongue of flame licked out. And Jack—poor, helpless Jack, tied hand and foot, probably—was in there! In less than five minutes the interior of that big structure would be a seething caldron of fire.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FIRE-BUGS THWARTED

FOR a few moments One-Wing seemed too paralyzed to act. Then recovering himself with a start, he vaulted the fence near him, and ran madly toward the burning barn.

Upon reaching the structure, he stumbled over something setting close to the wall, and felt a dash of wet strike against his knee. Putting down his hands and feeling about, he uttered an exclamation of joy, as he discovered an old wooden pail half-filled with water, evidently used by the Wigginholts for watering stock.

This he seized, and jumped to the big doors of the barn, which he found the interlopers had shut after them. It took but the work of an instant to throw back the hasp, and swing open one of the doors far enough for him to gain an entrance. Fortunately such a short time had elapsed that the fire had gained but little headway, otherwise he must surely have been driven out by smoke, quite unable to see or reach the source of the blaze.

Even as it was, clouds of smoke were begin-

ning to roll through the structure. Undaunted by these, although coughing and almost choking, One-Wing peered through the murky gloom till he caught a view of the red tongues of flame arising in a distant corner. Then, pulling his hat low over his face, he glided across the plank-ing with his heavy pail, breathing as little as possible.

As he came up to the fire he saw that the fire-bugs had pulled a small quantity of hay together near the wall. This was now almost consumed, and the flames had begun to eat their way into the dry pine boards of the side of the barn. With a silent prayer for the success of the movement, he now dashed his pail of water, using his one hand and knee together, upon the licking flames. Instantly they died out, and except for a nauseating volume of thick smoke arising about his head, and a few sparks that smouldered brightly, the conflagration seemed entirely extinguished.

One-Wing, however, did not desist. Tearing off his coat, he prodded and punched with it against the live embers remaining in the wall, at the same time stamping upon the all-but-consumed hay at his feet.

During all this time he had been cognizant of the fact that Jack was somewhere confined in the barn, but had not dared to divert his

attention to him until the threatening conflagration was first subdued, or at least held in check. With this now accomplished, he turned his attention to his younger chum, recalling that several times during his fight with the flames he had heard a muffled sound as of some one coughing under the folds of an obstruction, just a few yards away at his back.

Unable to discern a thing in the dense darkness that now enveloped the interior of the barn, One-Wing extracted a match from his holder, lighted it, and held it aloft, looking in the direction from whence the strange sounds had been emanating. To his great joy he could see Jack, securely bound with rope to a stanchion not a dozen feet distant! The light also disclosed the fact that he was gagged with a bandana handkerchief. Above this, the boy's forehead showed pale and white, but his eyes were steady and unafraid. The one-armed young man was sure he could detect the sparkle of recognition and thankfulness in them, too, as he quickly stepped forward and slashed the ropes with his jack-knife, and wrenched the gag from Jack's mouth.

"Oh, One-Wing! You good old scout—" exclaimed Jack, only to end in fit of coughing, for the smoke was still too thick for conversation.

One-Wing said nothing, but grasping him by the arm, hurried him outside. Then he re-

turned and secured the pail. From a trough near by he and Jack re-filled it several times, soaking the spot where the fire had been until it was out beyond all possibility of doubt.

Then they stood for a few minutes, filling their lungs with the fresh, pure night air, feeling still too wrought for speech, but their minds exceedingly active.

At length Jack broke the silence. "One-Wing, old pard, I won't say much about it," he said with a quaver in his voice, "but if it hadn't been for you that barn with all its valuable stores would have burned, and me with it! I had fully consigned myself to my fate when you arrived. Jinks! it's nice to suck in this sweet air of God's again, and know I can go on living for a while longer. Where are the rest of the boys?"

As briefly as possible One-Wing explained his presence there, adding: "Jack, I know you must be half dead from want of food an' sleep, but kin you stick it out a bit longer? Red and Gus are leggin' it fer the station in Somerville right now, accordin' to their plans that we overheard, a-thinkin' this barn is sure goin' up. Now we must git to Somerville and ketch them fellers before they escape."

"I fully agree with you," sanctioned Jack. "And as they have the start of us, and we don't

know how soon the train they intend to take pulls out, I propose that we awake the Wigginholts and see if we can't get Mr. Wigginholt to accompany us in his auto to town. On our way we'll stop at Suicide Hollow and pick up some of the boys to help us out in the capture."

One-Wing was heartily in accord with this suggestion. Therefore, the two Hikers hurried off toward the dark house of the sleeping farmers, who were all unconscious of the peril that had so recently threatened their splendid barn.

In answer to repeated knockings, the elder Wigginholt presently appeared at the door with a lamp in his hand. If surprised at the disclosure of the identity of his late callers, he was even more astonished at the tale they divulged.

"Well, I swan to man!" he ejaculated. "Who ever would have thought that Gus feller was a German fire-bug, an' that that innercent chalk figger on my gate, that I saw myself an' thought nothin' of to-day, was a sign fer his pardner to set fire to my barn! 'Course I'll get out my car an' go with you, boys! The first train through Somerville fer the East is due at eleven-fifty,"—looking at his watch—"an' it's eleven-five now. We kin make it all right with the 'bus, I reckon, but we'll have to hustle. Jest wait a minute, an' I'll finish dressin'."

A few minutes later all were making their way hurriedly to the barn with a lighted lantern. Just before they reached the doors Jack stooped and picked up some small object that lay upon the ground. It was his own match-safe, containing his carved name, placed there by the crafty rogues before their departure to throw suspicion upon him and his mates. He explained this plan to the farmer as he was getting out his car, and Abe Wigginholt repeated his condemnation of Red and Gus with certain extra trimmings that would not look well in print, so angry was he.

Jack and One-Wing sprang into the big automobile, and the farmer turned on his headlights and a moment later they were out of the yard and into the road that led past the camping-site of the Boy Hikers and into Somerville.

They had gone only a short distance when a group of approaching wayfarers suddenly came within the beams of the auto lights. They seemed to be in a great hurry, as all were loping.

"Watch out, fellows, for the auto!" cried one of the party in a strangely familiar voice, as the dark figures in the roadway sprang to one side.

"Ears! as I live," exclaimed Jack. "It's our boys, Mr. Wigginholt. Stop at once!"

And so it proved. At the sound of Jack's

own well-known tones, there was a mad rush of the obscure forms in the road for the car, and the next moment the missing young leader's hand was nearly shaken off in the excessive joy of his comrades at this unexpected meeting.

"We got news that a barn was likely to be burned one of these nights, but we didn't know just which one, and we thought we better go over to Mr. Wigginholt's and tell him to be on the watch-out that it wasn't his, anyhow," said Ears.

"How did you get this news?" asked Jack in surprise.

"This is the chap who brought it to us," was the answer, as Ears pulled up another figure which had hung back awkwardly in the background.

"Joe! You?" cried Jack and One-Wing, almost in a breath. "Why," went on Jack, "I thought you—" He stopped, lost for words.

"Thought I had skipped for good," finished the French lad, with downcast eyes of shame. "Well, Jack, so did I when I quit you fellows, but I'm sorry I ever did it now. That man Spiess, whom we thought was a reporter, but who I am sure now is nothing but a German agent trying to break up the Government work of our Club, coaxed me to quit you fellows by offering me a job as pitcher in a fake baseball

team. I discovered this accidentally by getting hold of a letter in his office yesterday morning. The letter was from a man named Red, and told about Gus Wettlaufer being with you, and the efforts these two rascals were making to bring you boys to grief. I was ashamed to do it, Jack, but I decided to hurry here in the hope of warning you before they did you any more harm."

Jack, who knew the proud, arrogant nature of the dark-skinned Joe, realized what an effort it must have cost him to make this confession of his own errors. As long as he and his companions had known the French boy they had never before heard him admit himself to blame for an action. Finest thought of all to Jack, Joe had voluntarily sought himself and comrades out under great difficulties, not to beg his way back, but to save them from trouble and prevent further destruction of farmers' barns by the merciless Hun emissaries. In fact, for the first time he had shown a thought for others, an ennobling forgetfulness of self!

The young leader cast a look toward the faces of his comrades, in quest of approval, but it was too dark to discern any sort of expression of countenance under that cloud-beridden sky. However, Ears seemed to interpret his thought, for he said: "Jack, if it's all the same to you

we're glad to let by-gones be by-gones with Joe, and proud to have him back with us. I've talked it over with the fellows."

Like a flash Jack's hand went out toward the French boy. How happy he was to hear his comrades felt this way! "Joe, I freely forgive you, and I want you to feel perfectly at home to be back with us again. I'll promise you will never hear one of us refer to this matter of your leaving again. Your old place is open and waiting for you. Will you come back with us?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then Joe's left hand was seen to wipe itself across his eyes, as the fingers of his right sought Jack's in a strong grip.

"I didn't seek this in coming here, but I thank you all," said Joe simply.

"Now you fellows all pile in here," called Jack. "We want you to go to Somerville with us!"

"Why?" asked several of the Hikers.

"Don't ask now," replied Jack, "but hop in, and be quick about it! We'll explain on the way along."

The boys did as they were bid. It was a tight squeeze, but all managed to stow themselves away in the big car. Then, as Mr. Wigginholt gave it the gas and they were carried

swiftly on in the direction of town, Jack and One-Wing told of their recent experiences to a very excited audience.

"I reckon we'll have time to pick up Bob Willard when we git in Somerville," remarked the farmer. "Bob's sheriff o' this county, an' it'll be better to have him on hand with us at the depot. Not one of us has got a gun, but Bob has, an' it may be needed right bad."

"That's so," agreed One-Wing. "Red is a desperate feller, an' I know positively Gus has got a pistol becuz I saw it only to-night when him an' Red was forcin' Jack along."

CHAPTER XXVI

PULLING IN THE NET

FORTUNATELY for the success of their enterprise, Sheriff Bob Willard lived in a little cottage almost directly on the way to the Somerville station. What was still more fortunate, he had been kept up late that evening, and had not yet retired when the big touring car came to a stop in front of his place and Abe Wigginholt jumped out and called him to the door.

Used to grasping unexpected situations quickly, it required but a minute or two of explanations for the lanky, huge-framed Bob to signify his entire willingness to accompany them. He stood upon the running board, therefore, while Abe Wigginholt continued on toward the depot.

When still a square away from their objective point, the car was stopped under some shade trees, at a sudden warning from Jack.

In the light from a switch-lamp, a little way up the track in the direction of the Wigginholt farm, two figures approaching the depot could be dimly descried. From the shamle of one,

Jack and One-Wing had no trouble in recognizing Red. The identity of his companion could easily be guessed.

Apparently the rogues had made the shortcut through the Wigginholt woods to the railroad as the quickest means for them reaching the station. This course was probably likewise preferred because by it they would avoid being seen by farmers who would be likely to be aroused by the expected fire and who would be sure to be on the highway in short order. As it was, it seemed more likely than otherwise that both fire-bugs did not know that their efforts to burn the big barn had failed, as the woods would hide it from view after they had entered the timber, and they had not had time to linger in the vicinity.

Sheriff Willard pulled out a small pocket flashlight and looked at his watch. It was eleven-forty-three. They yet had seven minutes before the train would be due. On account of the proximity of Red and Gus to the depot, it was obvious that the party could not now gain a hiding place within, as they had planned, and spring out upon the culprits as they were purchasing their tickets. Some other plan must be devised.

"I think we had better separate," determined Bob Willard. "Each will work in toward the

depot, keeping in the shadows, from a different point. These fellows are undoubtedly not the common run of rascals, and will have their eyes peeled for trouble, so we could never get up on them openly, especially in a group. In just five minutes I will be as close to the station as the shadows outside of its lights will permit, and you do the same. Then I will give one sharp whistle. That will be the signal for everybody to close in as fast as he can. Don't let any of them get through, but watch out for any guns they may have. I'm sorry I've only got this one barker here. Now let's scatter."

With the words they took separate courses, leaving the car where it stood, each hugging the shadows of buildings, fences, trees and other structures, and beginning an encircling movement about the lone little station, around the farther side of which the emissaries of the German government had already vanished.

Grease decided, apparently, that there was little use of a fellow of his ample proportions matching himself against the nimble heels of one of Gus's or Red's build, or else he misjudged his surroundings, for he presently found himself some little distance above the depot when he finally emerged into the railroad right of way. He had barely gained this position when he heard, from a point seemingly directly oppo-

site the depot, the penetrating blast of Sheriff Bob Willard's signal.

At once Grease commenced to waddle prodigiously down the track toward the station, according to orders, scattering pebbles to right and left with his clumsy feet, while his short, pudgy arms swung like flails. As he bowled along he saw the figures of several persons, presumably his friends, darting across the tracks in front of the depot down ahead, while other forms swept down upon it from either end.

"Guess I won't be in on this at all," was the fat boy's disappointed thought as he panted onward.

Just then he saw two new figures break forth from the shadows of the station door. In the pale yellow light of the single electric lamp illuminating the platform he rightly concluded these were Gus and Red, alarmed and seeking to escape. He saw the forms of his comrades, however, closing in upon them. Then one of the fugitives, apparently Red, was seen to go down under the weight of the lanky form of the sheriff and one of the Hikers.

But the other fugitive seemed to break through the cordon, for there arose excited shouts, as he shot away clear, and started up the track toward Grease, closely followed by several pursuers.

With the fleeing runners between himself and

the depot and yard lights, their forms were sharply silhouetted to the fat boy, while he himself, by reason of the darkness of the night, must have been quite invisible.

Pursued and pursuers covered the ground rapidly. But it was plain to be seen that the gap between them was gradually increasing, except for one, who clung doggedly to the fugitive's heels and seemed actually to be gaining upon him. A moment or two later this was an assured fact.

So close had he drawn up that Gus—they were now near enough to Grease for him to establish the identity of the fleeing man beyond further doubt—suddenly stopped and drew something from his hip pocket which he leveled at his pursuer threateningly. The latter also paused, and the fat boy saw that it was Joe Laporte—Joe, the fastest runner of all the Boy Hikers.

"Back with you or I'll put a bullet in your hide, cuss you!" he heard Gus cry savagely.

Grease did not blame Joe for stopping; it would have been sheer foolhardiness on Joe's part to have ignored the desperate Gus's threat.

Facing his foremost pursuer, Gus now began a slow backward retreat, all the while keeping his revolver pointed at Joe.

"Keep right where you are, Joe Laporte!"

called Gus. "Remember if you move a step toward me, or any of your friends, you're going to get it!"

By this time the two other pursuers, who proved to be Ears and One-Wing, had come up. Behind Joe they halted, likewise not caring to risk farther advance in their unarmed state.

During this episode, Grease had been standing quietly on the track several rods away, not knowing what else to do. Now, filled with a sudden idea as Gus began backing up in his direction, he dropped down between the rails.

Step by step the fugitive continued his retreat, shaking his weapon threateningly the while, quite unconscious of the bulky obstacle in his path. Suddenly his feet struck the fat boy's body. Up flew Gus's arms wildly, in an ineffectual effort to save himself. It was too late. Completely overbalanced, he went sprawling backwards over Grease upon the ties, his pistol flying from his grasp.

Before the astonished and dismayed city fellow could rise, he was pounced upon by the big fat boy, and the next moment Grease had more assistance than he really needed in the shape of Joe, One-Wing and Ears. Gus was subdued in short order, and with his own pistol as a persuader in the hands of Grease, he was quite willing to be marched back to the station.

Here the fat youth's exploit furnished everybody but the captives themselves with a good deal of amusement and admiration. The station agent secured some rope from the baggage-room with which Gus's hands were bound, Red already having been manacled with the sheriff's handcuffs.

The two rascals looked at each other glumly, Red scowling, but not a word did they pass. The older man, it was easy to see, felt sullen and defiant; but on Gus's face was a look of abject fear.

"Well, my fine fellows," said Sheriff Bob Willard sternly, "I think you have reached your rope's end. What have you got to say to this charge of firing farmers' barns, eh?"

"It's all a lie; you can't prove it," growled Red.

"No, you can't prove it," repeated Gus, though much more weakly.

"What are you going to say to this letter that I secured in the office of your spy employer—William Spiess—in New York?" cried Joe, bringing a sheet from his pocket. Stepping a little nearer the depot light he read it aloud.

All could see the faces of both men go white. But the red quickly returned to the rough features of the elder and more hardened rogue. "I never wrote that letter," said Red stubbornly.

"That's too slim a story altogether," declared the sheriff. "With the proof we have at hand you are both bound to be convicted, and you know what conviction under the charges of treason, espionage and arson mean in war-time like this? Usually death! At the best it means a long term of years in the penitentiary. I would advise you to make a clean confession, as only in that way will you get a lighter sentence."

"I'm willing to own up," said Gus, "if you will only go easy on me."

"I'll promise to do what I can for you," agreed the sheriff. "Now let us hear it all. Who is this man Spiess, and how did you two chaps get in with him?"

"You see it was this way," began Gus, averting his eyes from his partner's scowling face. "Some years ago when I was tramping around the country I fell in with Red here, and we bummed the roads for over a year together. Then I took up playing baseball for a living with some of the minor leagues. Bill Spiess is a cousin of mine, born in this country, like me, but our parents were from Germany, and strong for it, the same as Red's, and we leaned that way when war was declared. Awhile ago Bill, who has an insurance office in New York, was hired by agents for Germany to do all he

could to hinder the Red Cross and farm work in this country, and he picked up quite a lot of pro-Germans through German societies in different States, to help him carry out his plans. Lately these men have ben setting a lot of barns afire all over the country, Red and me with 'em."

"Then you have fired other barns than the two on this trip?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes, half a dozen more; but that was before we knew these guys. When they came to New York, and Bill Spiess read of their Red Cross work, he made up his mind to stop it. First he tried to persuade them to quit, but when they wouldn't he managed to work me into the team by getting Joe to quit. I was to cause them to lose all the games I could, by playing poor myself, and Red was to follow us up and try to get the guys in trouble by setting fire to barns where they had worked. It was hard for us to get together, so I was to indicate the barns to be fired by chalking a tramp sign on the fence or gate of each place. I hate this Jack Westwood, because he beat me up in a fight, but now that it's all up with Red and me I'm glad he didn't burn in old Wigginholt's barn."

"You can surely thank your stars for that," said Bob Willard earnestly; "otherwise your punishment would be much more severe. But

for this young man here"—he reached out and pulled One-Wing up closer—"both of you would have had to pay the penalty for Jack's death with your own lives."

For the first time the one-armed Hiker was under the light where Red could get a good look at his face. He gazed steadfastly at One-Wing for a moment or two, with a puzzled look in his eyes.

"Say, young feller, ain't I seen you some place afore?" blurted Red.

The former young tramp stepped up close in front of the man. His eyes blazed into those of Red until they quailed. His one hand clinched into a bundle of muscular knots.

"Seen me before, Red Schrems?" demanded One-Wing, with biting sarcasm. "Take a good look!"

Red's shifty eyes wandered back for an instant. But they could not stand the accusation and glitter in the others, and again turned. He shook his bull-like head. "I've seen a face somethin' like yours afore, but I can't place it with a feller with only one arm," was the uneasy declaration.

"Think!" persisted One-Wing. "Think back, you hound, ten or eleven years! Ferget the arm. Kin you recall the young boy you an' Limpy Mike compelled to beg for you on the road?"

Red's eyes went into a stare now. "You—you—you ain't Earl Westwood?" But in his own look there was belief.

"Earl Westwood—yes," said One-Wing bitterly. "The little chap you kept from his home till it was too late—till he lost his arm in making his escape from you—till his parents had given him up, and moved to unknown parts. Here he stands afore you, Red Schrems, ready to thank you fer all this! *Then* I couldn't take my own part, but *now*—" The speaker's eyes shot fire, as he drew himself to his full, stalwart height, and silently raised his single fist.

Red trembled violently, lifting his manacled hands as if to shield himself. "Don't hit me, Kid!" he implored. "I didn't mean you no harm, nohow."

One-Wing gazed at the cringing man contemptuously. His fist dropped; relaxed. "Do not fear," he said proudly; "I am not the kind to strike a defenceless man, no matter how he has wronged me. You have troubles enough in store fer you now, Red Schrems! I'm willin' to let Uncle Sam mete out my revenge along with his." With the words he turned his back to the vagabond.

The sheriff now addressed the young leader of the Boy Hikers. "Jack," he observed, "this William Spiess must be looked up without de-

lay. Can you and Joe go to New York with me on the morning train?"

Jack consulted with his comrades. Then he said: "I think so, sir, if you think we could meet the boys in Flemington—our next stop—in time for our game there Tuesday."

The officer declared he thought this could be accomplished, whereupon the prisoners were put in the Wigginholt automobile, and taken by himself and the farmer to the town jail. Abe Wigginholt then returned to the station for the boys, and not long afterward let them off at the ravine, while he proceeded on homeward alone.

Quite needless is it to state that the weary, heavy-eyed Hikers curled up in their pup-tents in Suicide Hollow almost as soon as they arrived there. Jack was the only exception. Having gone the entire day without a bite to eat, except for a few crackers and an apple which Abe Wigginholt had brought out of the house as they were about to start for Somerville, he now regaled himself upon a hot egg sandwich.

Compelling himself to be satisfied with this—a very wise course at that late hour—he likewise sought his blanket, and soon his heavy breathing blended in with the chirp of a cricket under a chip in the further corner of his little khaki abode.

CHAPTER XXVII

GETTING THE KING-BUG

AT seven-thirty the following morning, Jack and Joe boarded the New York train with Sheriff Bob Willard, and ten minutes later were being carried swiftly back to the big city, bent on a mission of no small importance to the welfare of their country.

While they sped on their way, Joe rehearsed details of his experience with the chief conspirator, William Spiess, which he had not before had an opportunity to divulge. This narration did not alter the plans of the officer of the law in any manner, but did not fail to impress him and Jack with additional respect for the deep cunning of their dangerous foe. It was manifest that the sooner the false reporter was placed under arrest the better off would be the farmers all over the land.

"This Spiess is a mighty bad man to have at large," commented Bob Willard. "It is just such fellows as he—well-educated men who have lived in this country for years, and become

trusted business men, but who are really traitors—who are doing the greatest work for Germany and the most damage for America here in our own land. While men of the stripe of Red and Gus are menace enough, it is these intelligent, conniving, engineering head rascals that the prisons need to hold the most. I hope we get this king fire-bug before he takes the alarm and skips."

"I hope so too, sir," responded Jack earnestly. "Our boys have promised to keep quiet, also Mr. Wigginholt, till the whole thing is wound up. So I don't see how Mr. Spiess will be able to get any warning."

"Red and Gus are sure fixed so *they* can't get word to him," put in Joe.

"And I cautioned the station-agent to keep his mouth shut," supplemented the sheriff. "It is lucky there were no passengers at the depot waiting to take the train on which Red and Gus planned to get away, and likewise lucky that the train was late and did not arrive until we had left the scene, otherwise it would have been exceedingly difficult to keep the news of the arrest out of the newspapers, and of course such a thing would be disastrous. Spiess would be sure to take alarm at once, afraid of a confession on the part of his hirelings, and by the time we had called on him his cage would be empty."



SUDDENLY HIS FEET STRUCK THE FAT BOY'S BODY. UP FLEW GUS'S
ARMS WILDLY — Page 274

About half-past ten their train pulled into the Grand Central Station in New York City. The little party proceeded directly to the Post-Office, where, after a short wait, they were closeted in the private apartments of the U. S. District Attorney. This gentleman listened attentively to their stories, which were substantiated by the letter of Joe's, also a signed confession from Gus Wettlaufer. He then wrote a warrant for the arrest of William Spiess, and handed the document over to a Federal marshal with instructions to serve it without delay, the three callers accompanying him.

On their way to the Knox Building, where the chief conspirator had his office, it was planned that the interview should be made at the noon hour, as Joe gave it as his idea that Spiess would probably remain in his apartments while his stenographer was out to lunch, and a surprise could thus be easier effected. This plan was made convenient too by the fact that it would apparently be a little past twelve when they arrived at their destination.

In this idea they were not mistaken. As they reached the wide entrance to the building, a young lady was seen emerging, whom Joe immediately recognized as the stenographer herself.

"Now, if this man Spiess is in, our job is

easy," stated the Federal officer. "I think I will have you two boys go in his office first. Do not knock, but walk right in. Willard and I will remain out of sight in the hall. Leave the door slightly ajar behind you, so that we can overhear what Spiess says to you. Do not let on what has happened to these other two men of his, but pretend you have come back merely to accuse him of deceit in working this boy"—he touched Joe—"out of your baseball team. I want to get all the incriminating statements from him I can before he suspects our real purpose. At the right moment Willard and I will enter."

Jack and Joe signified their understanding of their parts. All then took the elevator up to the eighth floor. Here the two officers lingered behind, while the youths proceeded straight along to Room No. 817. Opening the door, they walked boldly in.

William Spiess was reading a newspaper in the outer office, with his feet cocked high upon a stool, puffing complacently at a half-consumed cigar. Both paper and feet came down very suddenly, as he recognized his callers. It was the first time either one of the boys had ever met him when his face did not wear an easy, ingratiating smile. Now astonishment and displeasure were plainly marked in his look.

"What! You—you here?" he sputtered nervously. "Why, I thought you were both out of the city!"

"I dare say, Mr. Spiess," remarked Jack dryly. "And I also fancy you thought we were in widely separated parts too. But you see we managed to get together!"

By this time the man had recovered from his first surprise. The old oily, suave smirch came back into his features. "It seems to me there is some misunderstanding, boys," he said. "I am glad to see you again, of course, only you came in so unexpectedly. Here, have a chair, young gentlemen, won't you?"

"No, thank you," said Jack coldly. "We have come to get an explanation from you, and the quicker we get it the better we'll be satisfied."

"That's right, Mr. Spiess," agreed Joe. "For one, I want to know why you lied to me and worked me away from my friends and put Gus Wettlaufer in my place?"

"And I would like to know why you pretended all the time to me and the rest of the boys that you knew nothing of Joe's whereabouts," declared Jack.

These questions were posers for the rascally insurance man to satisfactorily answer. Had he been able to have these indignant youths before him at separate times, he might smooth

matters over, he told himself. But, as it was, he saw that he was fairly caught; that he must either frankly acknowledge his duplicity, or refuse to answer. Furthermore, he realized the futility of continuing the genial front he had adopted. It would have been obvious to even a less crafty scoundrel than he that he could no longer hope to maintain the confidence of these two lads whom he had so grossly wronged:

So he assumed his natural aspect; and it was one that would have frightened the wits out of boys of less courage. In fact Joe trembled, even backing up a step or two toward the door, as he saw the mealy skin of the man's cheeks grow purple with rage and his pale eyes glitter with hatred.

"Well, what if I did play a little game to get Gus Wettlaufer in with your team, my smart young gentleman?" fumed William Spiess. "That is my business! And as for you," glaring at Joe, "you were given a hundred dollars and a nice little vacation in Boston, so you have no reason to complain. Now answer me a question or two! How did you two get together again? And where is Gus?"

At that moment the partly open hall door of the room swung ajar, and in strode the officers of the law.

"Let me answer that last question, Mr. Wil-

liam Spiess!" said the marshal, coolly taking a document from his pocket. "The man you call Gus is where you will be in very short order—behind the bars! I have here a warrant for your arrest as a dangerous German secret agent."

"It's a lie—a dastardly lie, made up by these young ingrates!" stormed Spiess furiously.

"We'll look up that later," smiled the Government man, producing a pair of handcuffs. And in the twinkle of an eye he had adroitly clicked them over the slender wrists of the German. He was searched, his keys taken, then pushed back into a chair, and guarded by Bob Willard, while the Federal officer and the boys looked in the desks in both apartments for whatever additional evidence could be found to support a prosecution.

Nothing was discovered in either desk. But in the small safe in the inner room much incriminating correspondence, together with records giving the names and addresses of the chief agent's fire-bug assistants in various States of the Union, were brought to light. This find caused a broad smile to illuminate the stern features of the Government officer.

"We've got him and his crew dead to rights now," he remarked, doing the documents up into a small bundle. "Boys, this is one of the

best, biggest and most valuable hauls my office has made since the outbreak of the war, and most all of the credit belongs to your little organization. You've got reason to be proud of it. Before another twenty-four hours passes I think every one of the men in this man's pay will be under arrest."

Of course this was cheering news to Jack and Joe, also to Sheriff Bob Willard when the boys communicated it to him a little later.

The party remained until Spiess's stenographer returned. She was plainly amazed to find her employer in the toils of the law. But the Federal officer questioned her closely. He satisfied himself that she was not in any way connected with the insurance man's nefarious practices; nevertheless took her address as a possible desirable witness, following which they left the building.

Upon once more visiting the Federal Prosecuting Attorney's offices that afternoon, the boys and Bob Willard found that their services would be no longer required in the case, unless notified subsequently at their homes, so the trio took the next train for Somerville.

"We made a quicker job of it than we figured," observed the sheriff, as their train bowled along through central New Jersey.

"And a good job at that," said Joe, his dark

face shining with satisfaction at the revenge he had secured upon Spiess.

"The boys won't be expecting Joe and me so soon," remarked Jack. "I told them before leaving that we probably wouldn't get into Flemington before to-morrow noon. If they hiked straight on to that town, as they said they would when I parted with them early this morning in Suicide Hollow, they ought to be getting in about this time. It is now six o'clock by my watch."

"Perhaps you can find their camp and join them there to-night," suggested the officer.

"We will try to do that," answered Jack. "A nice soft bed indoors may be all right, but just the same I prefer to spend all the nights I can rolled up in a blanket under the fragrant trees. There's nothing to compare with it, sir. The sighing of the winds in the branches overhead, the rustle of the long grasses all about you, and the soft calls of crickets and other wild things soon sing you to sleep. And then the fresh pure air of the night makes you sleep like a baby."

Bob Willard laughed heartily. "You make me want to be a boy again," said he enviously. "I used to enjoy those things, too, when I was your age. Now I don't get a chance to get out in the open so much. But it's a great life—a great life, boys!"

Not long after this the locomotive whistled for Somerville. The lanky sheriff arose when the cars stopped and stepped out on the platform of his home town.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOME!

"JOE, I want you to pitch to-morrow."

Joe Laporte's dark face flushed. He raised his eyes quickly to Jack's as if to make sure he could be in earnest.

"Want *me* to pitch, Jack?"

"Yes."

"Against Flemington?"

"Yes. Will you?"

"After the way I used you fellows?"

"Never mind that! Didn't I say we would never refer to it again?" demanded Jack, as the train sped on.

"It will suit the fellows better, I think, if I play my old change position in left-field," asserted Joe, slowly.

"Not a bit of it!" was the quick retort. "By what you have done recently, Joe, you have caused the boys to think more of you than ever before. I don't mean, by that, what you did by leaving us, of course; I mean your efforts to right the wrong, and the nerve you showed in chasing Gus up the track in the face of his

revolver, till he fell over Grease. I broached this matter of you pitching to-morrow's game to the fellows before I left, and they also want you to do it."

Joe was silent for a few moments. It was apparent that new emotions were at play within his breast. Finally he reached in his pocket, and his companion saw something like a small white box go sailing out of the car window.

"What was that, Joe?"

"Cigarettes," was the French lad's short but expressive reply. Again there was silence—a brief but painful silence. Then Joe added: "I've made up my mind that a chap wearing a Boy Hiker uniform has no business disgracing the rest of the crowd by smoking those things. I'm done with them for good."

Something told Jack that it would be best to say nothing. But he could not refrain from placing his hand sympathetically and joyfully over the back of Joe's as it lay upon his knee. A moment it staid there, silently telegraphing to the French boy the great gladness that his words had brought its owner. Then it was unobtrusively withdrawn, and Joe heard the words again: "Joe, I want you to pitch to-morrow. Will you?"

"Yes," came the answer; "I will. And it will be the hardest pitching I've ever done!"

"I'm glad to hear it, old chap. That means another victory for us, I'm sure. We need it, as we've only won one game out of three so far on this back trip. Gus gained his ends in that respect, if in nothing more."

Within a little less than an hour, they stepped out upon the platform of the station in the town of Flemington. Darkness had fallen, and it was seen that it was too late to attempt to hunt out their friends that night. Therefore, both boys went to a hotel.

The next morning they looked for Ears to make his customary trip into town to arrange for the afternoon game, so did not start out to look up the Hikers immediately after breakfast, but hung around the post-office, where the young secretary of the Boy Hikers Club was most likely to make inquiry for directions to reach the manager of the local baseball nine.

Sure enough, along about eight o'clock they saw the well-known stocky figure of Ears approaching from down the street. He was naturally greatly delighted to find his chums back from New York so early in the day, and particularly pleased to learn of the successful outcome of their mission. He said his party had arrived before dark the following afternoon, had encamped on a ridge a little way to the east of town, and that the boys had gone

off to find work, with nearby farmers, as usual, when he parted from them.

Jack and Joe accompanied Ears about his business of the morning, and as the forenoon was well advanced before everything was in readiness for the game, and the trunks transported out to the baseball grounds, the trio decided to remain where they were until their comrades put in an appearance. They took lunch in a restaurant, after which they passed an hour in the post-office writing letters home—home, sweet home, which they were now rapidly nearing. In the course of two or three more days, if all went well, they would be there.

Shortly before two o'clock, a group of dusty khaki-clad figures could be seen coming down the street, followed by divers small boys. They were swinging along easily, laughing and chatting good-naturedly. It was the first time either Jack or Joe had ever seen them thus. On all other occasions they had been one of them, and not spectators.

A moment later a great shout went up, as the Boy Hikers discovered the identity of the trio awaiting them in front of the post-office. A rush was made by the brown figures, and Jack and his companions were surrounded. Everybody wanted to know at the same instant how they had come out in New York. Jack paci-

fied them by a brief statement, promising details when they reached the dressing-room at the ball park. There, a little later, as they put on their natty ultramarine-blue uniforms, he kept his word, assisted by Joe, amid ejaculations and comments of satisfaction from all.

I will not attempt to describe at length the game of that afternoon with Flemington. It is enough to know that, while the contest was devoid of any sensational features, it was a clean, crisp struggle for supremacy throughout. Early in the game the Boy Hikers took the lead, and maintained it to the end, despite the fact that the local team changed pitchers three times.

Joe pitched as his team-mates had never seen him pitch before. He had good speed, unusual control for him, and his curves were parcelled out in a manner to keep the opposing batters guessing. His comrades backed him up with almost perfect work. Jack took Gus's old place in left-field, and nothing got by him. So it is small wonder that the score-board read 7 to 3 at the end.

The following day our boys started out for New Hope, the next and last stop of their journey. This, the smallest town in which they were scheduled to play ball, was situated across the State line, in eastern Pennsylvania, their own State. It was, by far, the longest day's

stretch they had undertaken, and over a more hilly ground, but by nightfall they had negotiated the twenty-seven miles, and set up camp in the outskirts as customary.

Assistance was again rendered thankful farmers the next morning. That afternoon they met the New Hope team on rather poor grounds—in fact, the worst they had encountered thus far,—but, with Jack in the box and Joe in the left pasture, they managed to mete out to the locals the worst drubbing they had administered to any opponent along the way, the Hikers securing five runs and New Hope none.

This gave the boys in khaki three games won and two lost on the trip—a thoroughly satisfying percentage, especially when they stopped to consider that it was undoubtedly through Gus's maneuvers that they had made such a poor showing at the beginning.

But better than all this, was another element of their success. This was their revenue in money from the games. Ears showed by his vouchers that they had taken in on the back trail just eleven hundred fifty-nine dollars and twelve cents—practically all of which they could turn over to the American Red Cross Society as soon as they reached Sterling!

When the boys heard this they pranced a jig about Ears for fully five minutes, ending up

with Indian-like howls and a regular war-dance.

Friday afternoon, about four o'clock, they began to tread familiar ground. Many of the boys had been along here on little excursions out of Sterling before they ever thought of taking a long hike such as they were now finishing. On their right were rolling, fertile farmlands, with here and there a woods. On their left, within a stone's-throw almost, swept the dark, murky waters of the Lehigh.

Now they dipped down with the road into a gully, and crossed over a little bridge under which gurgled a small creek on its way to the larger stream. On top of the hill that they then struggled up, all paused as they saw Jack raise his hand.

It was from this same eminence that, at the beginning of the trip, some four weeks previous, they had paused for a last loving look at the little home town itself. How distinctly every boy there recalled this now! Then Jack had said, "When we see it again our shoes, I suppose, will be a lot thinner at the soles, and our skins a lot browner," and now as they thought of that assertion and looked at the faces and footwear of their comrades, and noted the tanned, healthy cheeks and the dusty, dilap-

idated shoes, to say nothing of the torn and travel-stained uniforms, they knew how true the statement had proved.

Once more every lad gazed off over the distant landscape in its beautiful mid-afternoon August colorings—green here, gold there, yellow here, brown there—and let his eyes come to rest upon a collection of house-tops far away, close to the shimmering, sun-struck waters of the river in which he had so often boated, fished and swam. In one of those abodes he saw, in his fancy, his mother, his father, and if he had them, his brothers and sisters. But now he was facing this scene, and would be facing it till he got to it—not turning his back to it, as four weeks ago. Oh, how glorious the thought! how very, *very* glorious!

I imagine we have all experienced the feelings of the Boy Hikers just then; namely, that it is nice to go off somewhere, but it is just a little bit nicer to be going home.

Yet for one of them Sterling meant no more than any other town of its size. This was One-Wing, the former young vagabond and tramp. While his young friends looked off at their home with feelings of joy, One-Wing did so with sadness, if not resentment. For rather than bringing to him additional cheer and the comradeship of loved ones, it seemed that Sterling

was to snatch ruthlessly and mercilessly from him all that he had come to care for in his rough and tragic life.

The boys ran gayly down the slope of the hill ahead. More slowly the one-armed young man followed, as though he chose to have the way linger. At a point where a road diverged from the one they were following, he paused and held out his only hand to Jack.

"Jack," said One-Wing, slowly and in a low voice, "I'll have to say good-bye to you an' the boys now, I reckon. My way lays down this other road, I figger."

The Hikers gathered around their companion in surprise and consternation. They had come to think of the former tramp as one to be always with them. They could not conceive of his leaving them in this fashion.

Of all of them, however, Jack Westwood was perhaps the most perturbed by One-Wing's announcement. He had come to regard the young man almost in the light of an older brother.

"Why, One-Wing!" exclaimed Jack. "Surely you're not thinking of leaving us?"

"Yes, I am," was the firm but sad reply. "You are back to go to school an' stay fer the winter at least. So I'll go on."

"But," argued Jack, "what of it? Supposing

we are back here to stay for awhile? Is that going to hinder you from putting in the winter in Sterling? All of the boys' folks will be anxious to meet you, and I know that my father will be only too willing to give you a good position in his business."

Jack's comrades assailed One-Wing with similar pleadings. But One-Wing, they found, had made up his mind.

"No, lads," said he, shaking his head, "it ain't no use to ask me to go on with you. Some time I'll hope to see you ag'in, an' mebbe in Sterling, but not now. A feller o' my language ain't got no use around refined homes like your'n. I'm goin' on, but not a-trampin' like I uster. At the first chance I'm goin' to get an eddication." Again he held out his only hand. "Good-bye an' be good till then," he added.

Realizing there was nothing else to do but wring the brown hand, the boys did so. In the eyes of all there was a suspicious moisture. Sorrowfully they watched the tall, lithe figure of One-Wing go down the diverging road. Nor did they move from their tracks, nor speak a word, till he stopped on a distant rise, waved his hat, and then vanished over the other side.

"Well, boys, this is tough," said Jack, as they started on. "It's hard to part with One-Wing

this way, but something tells me that some time we are going to meet him again."

"Here's hoping, anyhow!" declared Ears, sententiously; and every boy of them sanctioned the hope in his heart if he did not give it words.

An hour later all had reached Sterling and—home!

THE END

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